

# DIABLO



## HEROES RISE, DARKNESS FALLS

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CAMERON DAYTON • MATT BURNS  
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# DIABLO III®

## HEROES RISE, DARKNESS FALLS

*A Collection of Stories from Blizzard Entertainment*

Micky Neilson • Cameron Dayton • Matt Burns • Michael Chu •  
James Waugh • Erik Sabol



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# Introduction

*Micky Neilson*

Heroism in the face of absolute terror.

That's how I describe the Diablo universe in a nutshell. It wasn't always that cut-and-dry. Not so long ago, debates sprang up internally here at Blizzard Entertainment regarding how to accurately characterize Diablo. We asked ourselves, What does *horror* really mean? And what does it mean for Diablo in particular? What is the best way to convey Diablo's blend of terror and dark fantasy?

Ask your average Joes on the street to define *horror*, and you'll get a dizzying mix of contradictory responses. Of course, your average Joes don't need to agree on what *horror* means in the world of Diablo. We do.

There were two major camps in the internal debates: suspense and gore. The suspense camp argued that you don't show the monster under the bed (at least, not right away); it's the anticipation of what lurks just beyond the light's reach that truly frightens us. It's the unknown. It's psychological horror. And quite often, when that monster is finally revealed, it looks an awful lot like us.

The gore camp interpreted horror in terms of blood and guts, the visceral revelation of the unthinkable and the unspeakable. This is about shock value. This is akin to what has also been labeled "torture porn" in many recent films. These movies aren't as much about building suspense as they are about making our stomachs churn. They're not going to withhold that which might traumatize us; rather, they will display it and force us to acknowledge it when every instinct we possess is screaming at us to turn away.

So where should Diablo fall? And keep in mind I'm talking about the intellectual property as a whole, not just the games.

In the end we determined that Diablo certainly has its gory elements, and these elements have their place. But Diablo is not about the gore. Diablo is about psychological horror first and foremost, the fear of that monster under the bed. Why? This is important: because what defines Diablo is the actions of the heroes who overcome that fear.

Terror—real terror—lies within each of us. We feed it daily with doubt,

desire, regret, jealousy, hatred, and a million other tasty treats. In *Diablo* these evils are represented by demons, but these demons only cultivate the seeds that we provide. The greatest challenge, then, is to win the battle against ourselves. That is the mark of true courage in the world of *Diablo*.

Once we understood that simple premise, the possibilities seemed endless. Such fertile ground yielded a wealth of story material for us greedy little writers to dig into.

And dig into it we did. When the opportunity arose for me to assemble a collection of *Diablo* short stories that would introduce or expand upon the classes featured in *Diablo III*, I was frothing at the mouth. Here was a chance to create an anthology that faithfully represented what we at Blizzard felt *Diablo* should be. I aspired to develop stories (and to write one) that fans would want to read with all the lights in the house turned on.

What you now hold in your hands is the result of our efforts.

In my demon hunter story, “Hatred and Discipline,” you’ll note a heavy Stephen King influence on a tale that delves into some of the most deeply rooted fears of all: fear of failure, of loss of hope, and of crossing that often indistinct line between good and evil.

In “Wayfarer,” the barbarian entry by Cameron Dayton, you’ll experience a somber yet at times rousing narrative told in a style reminiscent of Robert E. Howard’s sagas of dark fantasy with horror sprinkled in. It is a brooding study of guilt and redemption.

“Unyielding” is the tale of a monk by Matt Burns in which you’ll discern strong notes of action-adventure, permeated by an underlying horror that is in many ways more frightening than any ten-foot-tall horned demon could ever be—the horror of humanity’s dark side.

“Firefly” is a thought-provoking rendering of *Diablo III*’s wizard, told by one of the game’s powerhouse developers, Michael Chu. It is a subtle meditation on cause and effect and the sometimes impossible price of great power.

“Doubtwalker,” by Matt Burns (with an assist by Jason Bischoff), is a primal fable that shines a spotlight—or, more aptly, casts eerie firelight—on an embattled witch doctor and the timeless struggle between faith and doubt.

Each of these stories debuted as part of the *Diablo III* web campaign, and together they are now collected here in one convenient volume. But we didn’t stop there. Just when you think it’s safe to close the book and scurry off to bed,

you'll find two more forays into the abyss.

"Theatre Macabre: The Dark Exile" is a breathless freefall down the rabbit hole of insanity and depthless evil (and a loving tribute to Edgar Allan Poe) by our very own James Waugh.

Finally, "The Hunger" by Erik Sabol (with additional work by Cameron Dayton) is a gruesome, unflinching dissection of cowardice and sloth, a haunting parable and stark reminder that courage may be found in the unlikeliest of places.

Whether you belong to the camp of suspense or gore, I feel more than confident that within these pages you'll discover material to make you think, to make you reflect, and to make you search within yourself for that sometimes elusive heroism in the face of absolute terror.

Now grab a warm cup of coffee, take a seat in your favorite chair, and prepare for what is to come. But before you read any further . . .

Be sure to turn on all the lights.



—FELIX—II



# Hatred and Discipline

*Micky Neilson*

Valla smelled the rotting dead from a mile away.

The air was warm despite the clouds that blanketed Khanduras as the demon hunter arrived in what was left of Holbrook—once a tiny, struggling farm community, now a deserted ghost town. Or so it seemed; the heavy stench of putrifaction suggested that the residents were still present, just not among the living.

Valla's mentor, Josen, stood in the center of the village, considering a pile of debris: scattered mason stones, upturned rock and soil.

He was dressed in the attire of the demon hunters' calling. The soft light reflected dully off the plate armor that adorned half his body. His twin crossbows were slung from his thighs, within easy reach. His hood was down, and his cloak snapped in the gusting wind.

Valla was clothed in similar fashion, the greatest difference being the long, dark scarf she wore that even now covered the lower half of her face. The sawyer's daughter slowed her horse, dismounted, and waited for a moment, silent and still, assessing.

There was a barely discernible, persistent hum. The only signs of life came from Josen and two other hunters, one searching the derelict structures, another standing near a run-down storehouse. Whatever had happened here, they were too late to do anything about it. Now it was a matter of looking for survivors. That was, after all, the second most important thing her people did: feed and shelter those left homeless in the aftermath of unthinkable catastrophe. Guide them, encourage them, heal them, educate and train them . . . to do the most important thing, should they so choose: become a demon hunter and annihilate the hellspawn responsible for evils like this.

Josen continued studying the rubble intently as Valla approached. "I came as quickly as I could," she stated, lowering her scarf.

The faint thrumming sound droned on. Josen's eyes remained fixed.

"We should not be here." His voice was loose gravel. "Had Delios succeeded in his task, we would not be here." His shimmering eyes finally met hers. "Tell

me what you see.”

Valla gazed at the upheaval. The masonry and timber were familiar . . . as was a dark liquid spattered across them. But there was also a black substance throughout, like tar, that she did not recognize.

“The town well,” Valla offered. “The demon emerged from here . . . wounded, given the presence of demon blood. Delios managed that much at least. I only pray that he died a hunter’s death.”

Josen kicked at the dirt. Beneath the surface, the soil was wet. “This happened not more than a day ago . . . after.”

Valla waited for Josen to continue. When he didn’t, she asked, “After what?”

The master hunter’s expression was unreadable. “Follow me,” he replied.

. . .

As they approached the storehouse, the hum rose in volume, a penetrating, vibrant buzz. As the thrumming grew, the fetid stench grew also. The hunter stationed out front swung open the tall doors.

A thick, dark mass, a living cloud of flies, escaped. And though the smell of degenerating flesh was familiar to Valla, the potency of its assault nearly drove her to her knees. She pulled her scarf tight and choked back bile.

Within the barn-sized enclosure, the townspeople were piled in haphazard mounds. Men, women . . . many of them bloated, their midsections distended. Some of the bodies had ruptured, insides spilling out, maggots working their way over and through the viscera. Fluid seeped from eyes, noses, mouths. Beneath the odor of decomposition was the unmistakable smell of feces. Hundreds of flies swarmed the carnage.

Valla frowned. The wounds, while gruesome, were not those common to a hellspawn attack. These were stabbings, impalements, crushed skulls—not the shredding, dismemberment, and decapitation associated with most demon slayings.

Josen spoke. “Delios was seen one day ago outside of Bramwell. He stormed into a bordello, killed everyone . . . then disappeared. Last night there was another massacre. Fifteen victims inside an opium den. Killed by crossbow bolt and blade.”

Valla’s eyes widened in disbelief. Josen answered her unspoken question.

“He fell to the demon’s corruption. He’s lost to us now. No better than a

demon himself.”

It was a horrific development, one every demon hunter faced, navigating the threshold between good and evil. All too easy for hunters to lose their ability to control their fear or hatred and cross over to the other side. But this . . . this was not the work of Delios. This was something different. Valla hid her unease. “Perhaps that is so, but no hunter is responsible for what we see here. No demon, either.”

“Agreed.”

“Do you think they turned on one another?”

“Possible,” Josen answered flatly before departing. Valla scanned the corpse mounds once more, noting something odd: there were no children among them.

• • •

Outside, Josen stood at his horse. Valla hurried to him. “I completed my last assignment. What orders now?”

“We continue searching for survivors. Come sunrise I’ll ride to Bramwell, and I’ll find Delios. Perhaps . . . it’s not too late for him,” the master hunter said, but his minor hesitation spoke differently.

Valla squared her shoulders. “I’ll go and seek out the demon, then.”

“No,” Josen shot back. “You’re not ready.”

Valla stepped closer. “Come again?”

The master hunter turned to her, his tone remaining even. “I said you’re not ready. We know very little of what we’re dealing with. What its methods are. We believe it’s a demon that feeds on terror . . . but Delios had that information as well, and it wasn’t enough to prepare him. A demon such as this . . .”

Josen’s eyes fell slightly. “It will reach into your mind and uncover every fear, every doubt, every regret, no matter how deeply buried. It will pit you against yourself.” The master hunter’s eyes snapped up, locking on Valla.

“Remember your failure at the ruins.”

“That was different. A demon of rage,” Valla protested.

“Rage. Hate. Fear. They all feed upon one another. A demon hunter learns how to direct hate. But such a balance is precarious. And when that balance is lost, the cycle begins: Hate begets Destruction. Destruction begets Terror as Terror begets Hate as—”

“I’ve heard it a thousand times!” Valla blurted.

“Then mark it well. You’re still young, and you have much to learn. If I’ve taught you anything, it’s that a demon hunter must always temper hatred with discipline. So calm yourself. The demon is wounded. Inactive for now. I’ll send another hunter.”

Josen turned to leave, but Valla was not done.

“I’ll go after Delios, then.”

Josen looked back. “You’ll stay and help search for survivors. Delios is mine. Those are my orders.” The master hunter then strode away. Calmly. And somehow, that infuriated Valla all the more. She wanted him to yell, to scream, to show some damned hint of emotion.

*Not ready? I’m not ready? After all I’ve been through . . .* “How dare you tell me what I’m not ready for?” Valla whispered.

An instant later she was astride her horse.

*Which way?* Which way would the demon have gone? Valla glanced at the blood among the debris. There was no trail outside the radius of the castoff. No help there.

To the east sat only mountains. To the west, the Gulf of Westmarch. Far to the south lay New Tristram. But the demon was wounded. Would it take a chance on the longer journey south, or would it travel northeast . . . where it might find more small farming communities like this one?

More easy prey.

The closest village, Havenwood, was less than a day away.

The choice was made.

• • •

Ellis Halstaff was concerned for her daughter’s health.

Sahmantha lay still in the downstairs bedroom, a cold, wet cloth draped across her forehead, her breathing shallow.

Sahm had woken up the previous night, screaming. It had taken a fair amount of time to calm the girl down; when Ellis finally did, and asked what was wrong, her daughter replied that “it feels like there’s something bad inside my head.”

Bellik, Havenwood’s healer, had visited earlier in the day. He had provided a tonic that would allow Sahm to rest, and prescribed a cold bath when

opportunity allowed.

But Sahm was resting now, and Ellis's little son, Ralyn, would need to be fed, and there was still work to be done before nightfall. It was easier before—in the days when Sahm's father was still present, before he left without a word, without so much as a note, never to return.

Ellis looked down at Sahm now and thought of the girl's most recent birthday, when the precocious seven-year-old had declared brazenly that she would “manage her own affairs, moving forward,” and that her daily routine would no longer include chores. She thought of Sahm's laughter, a hearty, unbridled guffaw. She thought of the night less than a week ago when Sahm had told her in the strictest confidence that she had a crush on little Joshua Gray, because his eyes were like a nice dream.

She thought of these things, and she prayed to Akarat that Sahm would get well soon, that she would have many more nice dreams and no longer be terrified by whatever ailment had befallen her.

• • •

Valla sat before the campfire, still a few miles outside of Havenwood, staring. She ran her finger absently over a long scar that traveled the line of her jaw.

*You're not ready.*

*A demon hunter must always temper hatred with discipline.*

Josen's words still stung. But the more she thought of it, the more she considered that maybe . . . maybe he wasn't exactly wrong. Her thoughts drifted back to the incident at the ruins . . .

She and Delios had journeyed deep into the southern Dreadlands, traveling together for several days. Delios was crude and abrasive and set her nerves on edge. Valla preferred to operate alone, but Josen had insisted they work as a pair.

They located the demon's hideaway among the long-forgotten ruins of some unknown civilization. Valla guarded her mind as Josen had taught her. He had warned them both that, with a powerful demon such as this, their battle would be much more than simply physical.

“*You are the demon's greatest weapon,*” he had counseled.

As the two wound their way down wide, monolithic stone slabs, Valla felt her agitation mounting. The base of the stairs opened into a cavernous grotto

where hundreds of gargantuan rocky pillars stretched upward, their caps lost in the darkness above. Flaming braziers cast pools of flickering light.

Delios surged ahead. He was reckless. Foolish. Valla's head throbbed. She could feel the demon infiltrating her thoughts. In her mind's eye its presence was black tendrils, probing, coaxing, provoking. Valla dwelled on every irritating habit, every negative quality, Delios possessed. Her agitation soon turned to anger, which turned to rage.

Delios darted ahead again, after she had yelled at him to stop. He spun, favoring her with a wicked smile. She became suddenly certain that he had been corrupted. He had crossed over. Her rage boiled over into a blind fury, and she knew that she would kill him. He was weak, pathetic. Ending his life would be a mercy.

She drove forward. Delios stood there, smiling tauntingly. She sprinted toward him. He ducked behind a pillar. Valla followed . . .

And he was gone. She *felt* the demon behind her, a hulking, otherworldly presence. Inside her mind, she could hear an echo of laughter. The demon had manipulated her with the ease of a puppeteer working the strings of a marionette. The Delios she had followed was not real. She had lost, and now she would die.

There was an explosion then, and much of what happened next Valla only remembered in brief flashes: Josen battling the demon. Delios rushing to help. Valla gathering her senses in time to fire several bolts from her crossbow. Josen shouting words of banishment. "I see you, Draxiel, lapdog of Mephisto. In the name of all those who have suffered, I cast you out! Begone and be damned, and may you never return!" Josen fired a bolt; an eye-searing brilliance flared; and the demon was gone.

The ruins had been a test. (Josen was fond of saying that everything was a test, that life was a test.) And Valla had failed. Now . . . now Delios had failed as well. And it had cost him his soul.

Valla was determined to defeat this demon, but she was also determined not to meet Delios's fate . . .

*He's lost to us now. No better than a demon himself.*

The sawyer's daughter suppressed a shudder. There was more than one way to banish a demon, but only one way that Josen had taught her. He had also told her once that "when a demon peers into you, you may peer back. But it is the most dangerous thing a demon hunter can do."

Valla's mistake at the ruins would not be repeated. She had grown too much since then.

The demon hunter retrieved from her pocket an etching of her little sister, Halissa.

"For you," she whispered. And as the flames of the campfire died down, she initiated a series of mental exercises taught to her by Josen.

• • •

*I'm not going to make it, Ellis Halstaff thought. I've lost too much blood.*

Escaping through the front door and sprinting to Havenwood proper were not an option. Not before she reached Ralyn. He was practically helpless, barely a year and a half old. He hadn't even mastered walking yet, much less protecting himself in any way.

At the staircase she pulled with her good hand on the banister, dragging her worthless right leg behind her one step at a time.

As her strength ebbed she thought of Sahm and wondered desperately why her daughter was trying to kill her.

After finishing her work, Ellis had gone in to check on Sahm, to see if perhaps she was ready for a bath. Sahm had smiled, pulled Ellis's best carving knife from beneath the sheets, and stabbed her in the leg, then repeatedly in the torso. Five, six times, maybe more. Ellis had spent precious heartbeats immobilized by the shock of the attack before she had finally run.

Ellis's head felt foggy now. She was halfway up the staircase when she heard the rapid padding of Sahm's bare feet on the floor below.

She turned, and there, at the bottom of the stairs, her beautiful blonde-haired daughter stood, clothed in the lacy pink dress Ellis had saved up to buy her for the harvest festival. The cloth was spattered a dark crimson that glistened in the lamplight. Sahm held the knife in her right hand. Blood coated her arm from the elbow down, dripping from the tip of the blade.

"Wait, Mama, I still need to get you!"

*She thinks it's a game; how can she think it's a game?*

Ellis hauled herself backward up one more step.

Sahm bounded over two of the stairs in one leap. "I said WAIT!" She slipped in the trail of blood on the step, pitching forward, her right arm arcing overhead, burying the blade in the stair Ellis had just cleared.

The sound of her own screams drowned out all other noise as Ellis whipped around and hopped up the last two steps to the second floor. She closed the distance to Ralyn's room in desperate lurches, her useless right leg dragging behind.

*Once inside, I can bar the door, then maybe—*

Ellis hit the doorway and froze. Ralyn was not in his crib. What was more, the wooden railing had been broken, pieces of it scattered on the floor.

The lightheadedness was more persistent now as Ellis reached out to the broken railing for support. Her limbs felt cold, responding slowly to what her mind willed them to do.

"There you are!"

Ellis spun to see Sahm in the doorway, a huge grin on her face, the kind she got when she would play roughhouse with Papa in the days before he left.

The world teetered. Ellis took a step back. She grasped a splintered piece of railing, long and deathly sharp at one end. She pulled it free and thrust it in front of herself with a shaky hand.

"What did you do, Sahm? What did you do to your brother?"

Sahm lowered her knife. Her puffy lips turned down at the corners, eyebrows knitted, her eyes wide and moist. It was the look she got when she did something she wasn't supposed to and was trying to escape punishment.

"Are you going to hurt me, Mama?"

The floor swayed like the deck of a ship on a restless sea. Ellis was vaguely aware that her hand and the stake were drifting lazily.

"I just want to know why . . ." Ellis sobbed, her voice sounding detached. "Is it because you're sick? We can get you help; we can go to Bellik and—"

She felt a sharp pain on the back of her good ankle then, a piercing clamp that shot an agonizing jolt through her entire body as she cried out.

Ellis looked down to see Ralyn where he had crawled out from under the crib. He gazed up at her warmly and offered a wide grin, his tiny teeth covered in a layer of bright red.

The world swam away as darkness closed in. Ellis's arm dropped; her head lolled back; and mercifully, she did not feel the long blade as Sahm plunged it through her chest.



Valla reached the outskirts of Havenwood shortly before midnight. The time of her arrival was not of her choosing, but it suited her nonetheless.

She would not be welcome in the town. Her kind never was; demon hunters were seen as dark omens, harbingers of death, even on the best of days.

The air was still warm as she passed moonlit fields thronged with barren cornstalks, and wide patches of land where rows of gathered wheat bushels stood like obedient soldiers. Harvest was under way.

Valla's ears were soon greeted with the sound of rushing water.

A river.

The sawyer's daughter felt a hollow tug in the pit of her stomach as she rode on.

• • •

The innkeeper turned pale at the sight of her, even though she had removed her hood and lowered her scarf to put him more at ease. He responded to her queries in minimal sentences. There had been no signs of trouble, nothing outside of the ordinary. No cause for concern. She gave him a note to pass on to the town healer come first light: *Any trouble, send for me.*

• • •

Upon entering her lodging, Valla went through her routine checklist, noting several details: a sturdy sideboard suitable for use as a barricade, if necessary. No connecting door to the adjoining room. A bed positioned against the far wall, with a clear view of the entry. A single desk and chair, and one window with a ten cubit drop to the ground outside.

Valla then removed her plate armor and numerous weapons. She placed the twin crossbows, daggers, darts, bolas, and quiver of bolts—taking special care with one bolt, crimson with runes adorning the shaft—within easy reach on the bed. She began to unpack. Throughout, the sawyer's daughter could not escape the nagging sensation that had vexed her on her ride in—that she was forgetting something. Something important. Something vital. It was as if there were a void in her mind, an emptiness where some essential knowledge had once been stored.

She finished her unpacking, then sat on the floor and closed her eyes, quieting her mind. She focused on the rhythm of her pulse.

Whatever it was that she had forgotten was not coming to her. Other thoughts then intruded as well.

What if she was wrong about all of this? What if she had disobeyed Josen for nothing?

Worrying about that now would do her no good, she decided. And the errant memory would return to her in time.

Valla moved to the desk and wrote a short letter to her beloved sister, Halissa. She recounted details of her journey, told her that all was well, told her that she loved her and that she would come visit her soon.

And she hoped that was true. Maybe after this demon was dispatched . . . maybe she could take some time away.

She folded the letter, placed it in an envelope, then deposited the envelope in her travel bag.

Valla snuffed the candle and lay on her side, facing the door, her mind working to retrieve what she felt was lost.

She sighed heavily and wished desperately, as she did every night, for a sleep without nightmares of the attack on her village. She wished, as she did every night, that just once she could dream of something good.

She had forgotten what it was like to dream of anything but slaughter.

• • •

Keghan Gray stumbled through the doorway of his farmhouse, having relieved himself in the flower garden outside moments earlier. Seretta would not be pleased if she found out, but she would also keep silent on the matter if she knew what was good for her. She *hadn't* known such things when they were first married, but over the years she had learned. Sometimes the lessons were hard but necessary.

The lamp beside the door was unlit . . . a matter Keghan would take up with Seretta come sunrise. A man could break his damn leg walking into a dark house. After three tries, Keghan succeeded in lighting the wick.

Keghan absently wondered where Rexx was as he headed for the scullery. On the nights when Keghan would come home late from the tavern, Rexx would normally greet him at the door, tongue lolling, tail wagging excitedly. Of course, Rexx preferred to sleep in Joshua's room . . . He was most likely there now, curled up at the foot of the bed.

The scullery table was bare. Keghan felt the aggravation well up inside, causing his hands to reflexively curl into fists as his jaw clenched. Seretta had been told to have a helping of supper waiting for him. She couldn't be that foolish. Keghan considered that perhaps Joshua had eaten his portion. If so, the boy would have to be punished. Punished sternly, as was warranted in such matters.

For now, though, it looked as if Keghan would be forced to cut his own meat. The ride from town had stoked quite a hunger, after all. Snatching a knife from the table, Keghan thrust the lamp before him as he stalked toward the larder.

He barged into the long, pitch-black room, lamplight revealing a few sizeable chunks of butchered pig hanging on hooks lining the wall to his right. He stood at a thick hog leg and smiled.

Keghan bent over to set down the lamp so he could cut off a slice, and as he did so, he noticed a puddle of something dark like wine on the floor. He held the lamp closer.

Blood.

The sight sobered him slightly . . . There shouldn't be blood on the floor. The hogs were gutted and cleaned outside.

It was pooled between his legs, emanating from somewhere behind him. Rising and turning, Keghan lifted the lamp, then nearly dropped it as he stepped back.

Rexx was dangling from a hook on the opposite wall, hung by the soft flesh under the jaw. Blood matted his fur and was still dripping from his tail. Most of his insides had been scooped out and were piled in the corner.

A warm breeze rolled in as the door at the end of the larder was opened from outside. The lamplight could not illuminate far enough for Keghan to see. He held the lamp down and away to let his eyes adjust. A voice drifted to him.

"Father?"

"Joshua! Get in here, boy; what are you doing outside?"

Keghan still could not make out much more than a dark blur beyond the light.

"I said get in here! Someone's killed the dog. Do as I say, boy: move!"

His eyes adjusted enough to see his son's silhouette then, standing motionless in the doorway, a long-handled scythe held in both hands, its curved blade etched in sharp relief against the moon and clouds.

“But there’s still reaping to do, Father.”

Keghan’s mouth hung open as he stumbled forward.

“What did you say, boy? Have you gone soft in the head . . . ?”

A few steps more, and the lamp cast light on Joshua. His work clothes were stained . . . the same wine color that covered the floor.

“Did you do this? Did you kill the dog, you sick little—”

Without a word, Joshua stepped forward and swung. Keghan raised his left arm to block, but at the last second the boy brought the scythe down and across, between Keghan’s ribs, ripping through his guts, the blade penetrating deep enough to leave the gore-soaked tip exposed on the other side.

A gurgling sound worked its way up Keghan’s throat, escaping as a rattle from his open mouth. The boy had stuck him! Stuck him like a damned pig. He would answer for that. Come what may, the boy would be punished. Harshly.

Joshua pulled the blade free, a mistake that Keghan took full advantage of. Advancing quickly, he buried the kitchen knife to the hilt in Joshua’s throat.

His son fell back like a stone. Despite the scythe blade’s absence, a searing pain scorched Keghan’s belly. He coughed up and spewed a massive spout of blood . . . and then he ran. He had killed his son! Now all he could think to do was get away, run as far and as fast as he possibly could. He headed straight into the cornfields, heedless of the stalks he crushed or drove aside, stumbling, spitting blood, dizziness threatening to topple him at any instant.

He ran as fast as his feet would allow, until the pain in his stomach at last forced him to his knees. He had ended at the base of the field’s scarecrow. He needed to get away. If only he could regain his feet. If he could reach town, if he could get to Bellik the healer . . .

Keghan clenched the pants of the scarecrow, pulling himself up, a long stream of mucus and blood dangling from his chin. The material beneath his closed fist, however, did not feel like straw.

And there was blood soaking the cloth. Was it his blood?

Consciousness was slipping. Keghan hacked violently, pulled himself up the rest of the way, and raised his head to see the face of the scarecrow . . .

And saw instead the slackened, horror-stricken visage of his dead wife.

Just before dawn the following morning, Valla stood beside a sheet-covered corpse in Bellik's study. The blood spreading out from the head had already begun to dry on the cloth.

"Who is it?" Valla asked.

"Durgen, the blacksmith. He—he could barely speak when he came to my door . . . only said a few words before he passed on, but that was more 'n enough."

"What did he say?"

"Heh?"

Bellik was a relic of a man, thin and stooped, and hard of hearing despite his overgrown ears. His discomfort in her presence was palpable.

"The smith's words, what were they?" Valla asked louder.

"Oh . . ."

The healer attempted to pull back the sheet, but the drying blood held it fast. Bellik yanked and the cloth came free, revealing a weathered man, one half of his head misshapen from the blow.

"He said, 'My boy did this to me.'"

Valla was silent for a long moment, looking, and there was that sensation again, the worrisome notion that she was forgetting something important. She pushed it to the back of her mind, focusing once again on the situation at hand, on the dead man betrayed by his own son.

There was a scream then from the street outside—the desperate death wail of someone whose life was coming to a violent end.

Valla spun for the door. "Stay here."

• • •

An instant later she stepped into the predawn light. In the street a boy, perhaps thirteen, stood over the body of a female merchant. The boy held a smith's hammer, its head covered in pulp. What was left of the merchant's skull was strewn among the wares arrayed nearby on a ragged blanket.

Valla thought of the fact that there had been no children among the bodies in the storehouse in Holbrook, and suddenly she understood.

There were no children because they had done the killing. Pawns doing the demon's bidding. For a brief instant, Valla was so shocked, so unsettled by the very idea, that she was off her guard. Vulnerable. She came to her senses and

continued to assess the situation. She must act soon, or die.

The scream had drawn others out now as well, but Valla took special note of a little blonde-haired girl in a pink dress at the end of the thoroughfare; she held a crimson-stained knife in one hand and supported a bloody, ravenous-looking infant on the opposite hip. Her eyes were wide and bright.

There was a creaking noise on the overlook above Valla's position, someone stepping out, but a short, high creak—indicating a person of light weight.

Another child.

The smith's boy was approaching Valla now with an open-mouthed smile.

Two other kids appeared in the gathering, one small boy dragging a sheathed sword, and an older girl with a large stone held in both hands.

Then, a final child, a fiery red-headed boy missing two front teeth, skipping with a hatchet in his right hand. A small crowd of five adults had emerged onto the street as well. A few faces peered from windows.

"Anyone of a mind not to get hurt best get behind locked doors," Valla commanded from beneath her hood.

"Now!"

The adults in the crowd complied.

• • •

Bellik stood at the window, watching.

He would have considered the woman beautiful once, back when he cared about such things. Now he saw only a harbinger of doom. It was known: where the demon hunters went, death followed.

The townspeople had moved inside, but the children . . . the children had stayed out, and they were positioning to attack. The smith's words came back to Bellik . . .

*My boy did this to me.*

What sort of madness had overtaken the world to turn children into butchers? And the woman . . . the demon hunter, surely she would kill them.

A cloudburst of smoke exploded from the woman's feet and immediately billowed, obscuring her from sight. An instant later, a small form dropped down into the haze from the lookout above Bellik's viewpoint. As the cloud began to clear, a hatchet flew end over end, missing the child who had jumped down by scant inches.

Bellik's head swiveled to see a figure rise to a stand several feet away in the thinning, dark mist. It was her. The smoke had been a distraction executed by the hunter. Her wrist flicked, and a little red-headed boy who had skipped into view—the Travers boy, Bellik thought it must be—slapped a hand to his neck as if he'd been bitten.

Bellik's chest tightened.

*She's killing them!*

The smith's son, Kyndal, rushed forward, eyes bulging, spit flying from his open mouth. He swung the hammer in a wide arc. The demon hunter stepped in, grabbed the boy's wrist, and turned into his swing, circling him around and sending him crashing into a boy Bellik didn't recognize, who was in the process of trying to pull a sword that was larger than he was out of its sheath.

That boy went flat on his back. The demon hunter snatched the hammer and swung it underhand, smashing the head into the bottom of Kyndal's jaw. Teeth flew. The woman sidestepped, and Kyndal toppled onto his face, out cold. A few feet away, the Travers boy, hand still pressed to his neck, fell down in a heap.

The demon hunter's hand flicked outward again, toward the child who had dropped from the lookout, someone else Bellik didn't recognize, like the boy with the sword. Visitors from Holbrook, perhaps?

Bellik's hands tightened into fists. Outside, two children rushed the woman—Sahmantha Halstaff, bounding forward as if playing a game of kickball, waving a bloody dagger before her, and Bri Tunis, hefting a weighty stone above her head.

Bellik had seen acrobats from the distant land of Entsteig years ago in Caldeum. They flipped and tumbled, somersaulted and cartwheeled, with an ease that was nothing short of incredible. The healer was reminded now of those acrobats as he watched the woman leap upward, tuck, and roll in a ball, unhindered by the hard-edged plate mail she wore, landing behind Sahmantha. It was a blur of motion and almost too quick for the eye to follow, but most amazingly of all, after the demon hunter's passing Sahmantha stood bound in a thin rope.

Not far away, the stranger who had jumped from the lookout collapsed, just as the Travers boy had done.

*Enough!*

Bellik ran to the door and opened it as the demon hunter spun, swinging

Sahmantha next to Bri, her movements impossibly fast, arms whipping like a flag snapping in a gale. When she was done, both girls were bound.

Sahmantha's brother, little Ralyn, was crawling forward, seemingly in an attempt to gnash his teeth on the demon hunter's leg. She lifted him up, drew her dagger—

“No!” Bellik called out.

—and drove it through the back of the boy's shirt, into a nearby support beam, leaving the child kicking and flailing harmlessly. She turned and strode toward Bellik.

“The children,” he breathed.

“Are alive. I used darts coated in a strong sedative. They're safe, for now, and will remain so only with your help.”

Bellik's fists unclenched. His shoulders sagged in relief.

“You're surprised?” Valla asked.

“It is said by some that your kind . . .” Bellik looked down.

“Say it,” Valla challenged.

Bellik summoned his courage. “. . . are no better than the demons. That your eyes burn with Hellsfire. That everywhere you go, death follows.”

Valla stepped closer to Bellik, who stumbled backward.

“It is said that when a demon peers into you, healer, into the deepest recesses of your mind, then you may peer back if you know how. And then you will see only vengeance. Only the hunt. And your eyes will burn with its obsession.”

Bellik's lower lip quivered. “Your eyes . . . do not burn.”

Valla's features softened. “No. I live for more than just vengeance.” Valla turned. “Now, I need a place where the children can be held. Separately.”

The healer thought for a moment.

“We got no more than one jail cell . . . but we got stables for the packbeasts. Stables could work, surely.”

. . .

Valla stood looking through the small barred window into the stable stall. Sahmantha sat there, hands and feet lashed together, head inclined, straight blonde hair concealing her face. The rest of the children were held in the remaining stalls, two or three in some, but Valla had insisted Sahmantha be



kept alone.

When the children had been transported here, a throng of townspeople had gathered around the wagons used to haul the young ones to the stables. Many of the citizens had grown violent, and much of their ire was directed at Valla. But Bellik, Bellik they trusted, and it was his counsel that had averted catastrophe, for the time being at least. The people waited outside the stables even now. Valla could hear the echoing din of their curses and lamentations.

Bellik had just finished speaking to them. "They want to know: why is this happening? Why the children?"

Valla opened the stall door, stepped inside, and kneeled in the dry straw.

"Lock the door behind me."

"But—"

"Do it."

As she heard the latch being slid into place, Valla parted Sahmantha's hair. She tilted the girl's chin up. The little one's eyes were closed.

The blonde hair, the fair skin . . . reminded her so much of Halissa. She thought of how Halissa's face always lit up at the sight of her older sister. She thought of Halissa's bright, inquisitive eyes and boundless energy.

Valla could not show weakness to the healer, but now, now a wave of nausea rolled through her, a tide of sadness and disgust, and suddenly Valla felt very tired, tired in both body and soul.

She remembered her village in Westmarch. She remembered her family. She fought back the rapidly unfolding memories of the massacre, when she herself had been little more than a child, the same flashes that plagued her night after night: screams of the dead and dying; blood; a demon claw swiping at her neck but cutting her jaw instead; running, Halissa's hand in hers; hiding near the river . . .

And, later, being found by others who had suffered similar fates, learning of the demon hunters. Being mentored by Josen, remade into an avatar of vengeance, a weapon forged to strike at the heart of darkness.

Valla had been absently rubbing the scar on her jaw. She leaned close now to Sahmantha. "Speak, demon."

Valla waited. No response.

"Do not play coy with me. This is a game you cannot win. Your only hope is to be sent back to your light-cursed master, to pray that perhaps the Hells will show you mercy, because I will not. Now speak your name."

Sahmantha did not stir.

Lowering the girl's head, Valla rose and stood at the barred window.

"Healer! You asked if there was a reason this demon chose the children . . . and I tell you yes. This pathetic wretch of a hellspawn chose the young ones because it is weak and the fledgling are vulnerable, easy prey for the scum that begs for scraps discarded by its masters."

Bellik was standing just inside Valla's view. He stared at her, eyebrows raised.

Valla felt it then: movement behind her, accompanied by the faintest sound.

The sawyer's daughter turned to see the girl standing on her toes, back arched, head tucked against her shoulder . . . Her hair had fallen from a face broken out in veins, her eyes wide, unfocused, bloodshot. When her mouth opened, it seemed almost to struggle in forming the words at first. Then . . .

"TURN NOT YOUR BACK, OH PRIDEFUL ONE!"

The voice was a loud, grating strain, like a continuous intake of breath.

"SEEK YOU TO STAND BEFORE ME?" The girl's head whipped from one shoulder to the other. "SUCH REACHING EXCEEDS YOUR GRASP, SUB-CREATURE. A DISTRACTION, NONETHELESS I MIGHT FIND AMUSING. RELEASE ME, THEN, AND SEE . . ."

Valla drew a blade. Bellik protested, his hands pressed tight against his ears, lips quivering. Valla appeared not to notice as she severed the bonds holding Sahmantha.

*Let us see indeed.*

Settling back on her feet, the child took two halting steps. Valla moved to the side, and the girl lurched forward to stand before the barred door. Her head rotated, chin rolling over her shoulder, vacant eyes staring.

"COME."

Valla called to Bellik, "Unlock the door."

Bellik's eyes shot back and forth between Sahmantha and Valla. "Is it safe?"

"No harm will come. I'll see to it."

After an instant's hesitation Bellik did as he was instructed. The girl, chin to her chest and hair hanging so that it was impossible for her to see where she walked, nonetheless proceeded unerringly into the stable.

Bellik gave her a wide berth, and then he and Valla followed as the girl passed the first stalls where the other children were held. To their right, the older girl who had hefted the stone earlier stood at a door, grasping the bars,

and when she spoke, it was in the gushing voice of the demon.

“I AM OLPHESTOS. I AM THE INFILTRATOR, PROCURER, HERD OF THE WRETCHED, AND FLAYER OF THE WRITHING DAMNED . . .”

Bellik glanced about in horror, his palms pressed once again to his ears as Sahmantha shuffled on. The boy who had dragged the sword in the street pulled himself up to peer through a window on the other side, the voice continuing, issuing now from his mouth.

“THE FOMENTER, GATHERER, INFLECTOR, AND THROAT OF THE SILENT SCREAM . . .”

Another child spoke from a stall on Sahmantha’s right. “THE FERRYMAN OF LOST DREAMS, SHATTERED HOPE, AND WITHERING DESPAIR . . .”

At the final stall appeared the smith’s son. There was a bloody vacancy where his front teeth had once been.

“THE READY RIGHT HAND OF TERROR. THE INWARD-STARING EYE. KNOW ME, AND KNOW THE UNSPEAKABLE.”

Bellik stayed close to Valla as Sahmantha stepped out into the sunlight.

Valla exited behind her, pushed back her hood, and forced her way through the gathered crowd.

“Make room! All of you! Bellik, a hand!”

The townspeople pressed in, questioning, accusing. Bellik shouted for the throng to make way as Sahmantha staggered forward.

Valla parted the crowd ahead of the little girl, who continued on. Her movements were erratic, spasmodic at some points, yet graceful and almost liquid at others. The knot of people proceeded past the shops on the eastern edge of town.

Sahmantha sped up her pace, and several of the townspeople fell behind. Bellik gasped for air, his face red with the exertion.

They had made their way along a desolate stretch of dirt road, little more than a path out into the fields beyond. Sahmantha stumbled out onto a patch of dead grass, stopped, turned. Her head straightened, and the demon’s gale-speak burst forth once again.

“SEEK YOU TO STAND BEFORE ME? THEN COME . . .”

The girl grinned slowly, but when she spoke next, it was with the voice of only a child, of little Sahmantha Halstaff. “We can play roughhouse together.”

Without warning the girl’s eyes closed. Her body went limp and collapsed.

Valla rushed forward and leaned close to make sure Sahmantha still lived.

She could hear the child's breath.

Most of the townspeople who had fallen behind caught up now, circling the demon hunter. Bellik stood nearby, steadying his breathing. Valla looked up as if expecting the demon to fall out of the sky.

Then, she looked down. She took note of the blighted grass, running her fingers over it. It spread out over a large expanse, stretching far and tapering on either side, forming the general shape of a massive eye. There were black spots throughout as well—demonic contamination.

“Healer, what’s below us?”

Bellik's eyebrows lifted. “Nothing.”

“That ain't 'xactly so.”

Both Valla and Bellik turned to one of the observers, a rotund farmer with a bushy white mustache.

“The river Bohsum would be right 'bout underneath our feet.”

Bellik watched Valla, and whether or not it was a trick of the light, he was unsure, but it seemed that she had gone slightly pale.

“But I heard the river as I rode in last night. I hear it faintly even now.”

The mustached farmer's brow dipped in what appeared to be mild annoyance.

“That ain't the real Bohsum . . . Just a channel dug out by the settlers ages ago, meant ta divert the water . . . 'Cause the real Bohsum flows outta the Deadfall Mountains—”

The farmer turned and pointed northeast.

“—and pretty soon comes to a sinkhole. Then it goes underground . . . runs through these parts deep below for quite a ways 'fore comin' back up two days' journey to the west.”

Valla scanned the immediate surroundings.

“No well?”

“Soil outside o' town's fertile enough, but the ground right here's harder 'n iron. Easier for the old-timers to dig the channel.”

Valla sighed as she replied, “This sinkhole and the place where the river resurfaces . . . there are no other ways to get down there?”

The farmer spat. “Nope.”

“And where's the sinkhole?”

The farmer nodded toward the mountains. “ 'Bout half a day that way.”

Bellik peered at Valla inquisitively. “So . . . so what now?”

The sawyer's daughter raised her hood and swept the crowd with her gaze.

"Stay here, and stay together. There is strength in numbers. Take Sahmantha back to the stables. Bind and lock away any other children under sixteen summers." She looked again to Bellik.

"And get me my horse so I can go kill your demon."

• • •

It sounded like a thunderstorm.

Valla stood at the lip of the cavity into which the Bohsum flowed, her eyes lost in the swirling waters of the sinkhole. The river entered the depression here and spiraled slowly at the edges, more vigorously inward, before finally disappearing into the darkness at its center, down into the unknown below.

The spray of it felt cool on her face as the twisting vortex and the sound like a gale took Valla's mind back to a night weeks after the attack on her village . . .

Valla and Halissa were huddled together for warmth as the rain pounded the earth. Halissa had fallen into an exhausted sleep. But, as had been the case for so many nights before, she was beset by nightmares of the massacre. Halissa woke up, screaming, and ran . . .

Nearby, the swollen river raced. Halissa ran too close to its banks, and she slipped in the mud . . . Halissa reached out her hand . . .

Valla had feared that Halissa would be swept away, lost forever . . . lost like the rushing waters that spiraled now into the core of the sinkhole, so very much like an eyeless socket.

Her heart sank at the recollection, but she had grasped Halissa's hand. It had worked out. Everything had worked out in the end.

Back in the here and now, the absence in Valla's memory was more pronounced, a persistent nothingness. Whatever the missing piece was, Valla vowed, it did not matter. She felt more tired than ever, but she would finish this. For Halissa.

She knew that her armor would only weigh her down, and so she shed it, piece by piece. Her weapons she placed in a satchel given to her by Bellik for just such a purpose. In the satchel also were flint and tinder wrapped in goatskin. To these she added her bolas and various explosive-tipped bolts.

She removed her cloak and hood and placed them in the satchel as well so they would not encumber her in the water. Once stripped of her vestments,

Valla cinched the satchel and stepped to the edge of the cleft.

Valla could think of nothing more unconscionable than a demon that would corrupt children. She felt a heat rise within her core, a seething fury. But that was what the demon wanted, wasn't it?

She thought of Delios. Of his failure.

*A demon hunter must always temper hatred with discipline.*

Part of her knew that she might not survive the plunge, that the churning waters could pull her to a watery death.

Valla took a deep breath and jumped.

• • •

It was a kind of isolated chaos within the roiling eye of the sinkhole. The world surrendered to obscurity as her muscles struggled to negotiate her body's orientation. Her chest burned with held breath. She fought to maintain her grip on the satchel in the midst of it all. She was whipped, rolled, thrust, and submerged deeper and farther until her consciousness threatened to abandon her completely. The darkness and lack of positional awareness were absolute.

There was a sense of rapid movement; various parts of her body struck stony protrusions as she was carried by the river.

And then . . .

Her fingers found a snag. She had grasped a thick stalagmite and was bracing against the rushing tide. She pulled her head clear and drew in as much air as her chest could hold.

She felt the satchel in her hand and was relieved. The water in her eyes made it impossible to see, and even after she wiped her face against her arm, her vision still did not clear.

The air was cool down here. Valla probed with her foot and felt a wall of stone. Finally, the blurriness diminished as she swung the satchel onto a ledge and dragged herself out of the raging torrent.

She sat, allowing her body a moment to rest, taking in her surroundings. The immediate area opened into what appeared to be a warren of tunnels and alcoves. Luminescent algae coated the walls, stalactites and stalagmites, rocky columns, and parts of the roof. The light cast by it provided an eerie, unearthly glow that rendered a torch unnecessary.

*Good, Valla thought. I can keep both hands free.*

Detecting any noise other than the gushing water was impossible, as the thunderous roar echoed throughout. Valla removed her cloak—which, remarkably, had remained mostly dry—from the satchel and fastened it for warmth. She unpacked her weapons, relieved to see that the crimson bolt was still among them, then set her crossbows and stood, one in each hand.

She gazed into a cave with jagged limestone spikes protruding from top and bottom like a shark set to swallow its prey, and she spotted a shadow against the blackness beyond, flitting from one side to the other.

Valla pressed after it, and as she did she felt the first brush of the demon's mind against hers, a malefic, detestable presence lurking just outside her awareness, a wolf prowling at the edge of a dark forest.

The sensation became more insistent as she stepped into the cave, senses fully alert. Her pulse raced.

*WELCOME*, a voice spoke in her head. Valla moved to the back of the cave, where a tunnel receded into darkness, the algae much sparser upon the walls. Here and there were patches of the same black substance found at the well in Holbrook.

She knelt and dipped her fingers in the viscous muck.

*WHAT PERSISTENCE YOU HAVE. WHAT DESIRE.*

*WHY?*

*THE EYE WILL SEE.*

Valla stood and snuck into the tunnel, crossbows ready. There was movement across the floor, a slithering, and then she saw it, its skin glistening just a bit in what little light existed, a black tentacle that rose, unfurled, and whipped out at her. Valla fired a bolt and the thing jerked backward, but the crossbow was a poor weapon for this task. She slung one crossbow and removed a dagger even as she felt the demon probing inside her head now, a dull ache. She envisioned black tendrils within her mind, not unlike the oily appendage that attacked her.

*SAWYER DAUGHTER.*

Valla sliced across, shearing the tip off as the tentacle shot forward. It retracted quickly, but the presence in her mind was burrowing deeper.

*DELIGHTFUL MEMORIES YOU KEEP INSIDE, BLOOD SACK. RIPE FOR PLUCKING.*

It felt as though needles were piercing Valla's head as she pressed on. The walls here were thick with the black, glistening sludge.

*VILLAGE. FAMILY. FRIENDS. WARMTH, SHELTER. HAPPY TIMES.  
THEN . . .*

*DEMONS. SWARM LIKE LOCUSTS.*

The walls seemed to squirm now as more tentacles emerged from the mire and uncoiled. Valla slung her second crossbow, removed another dagger, and lashed out, left and right.

*RUNNING.*

*COWARD.*

*ABANDONED FAMILY. LEFT THEM TO DIE.*

Valla wrestled with the part of her that said it was true.

*You are the demon's greatest weapon.*

"There's nothing I could have done but die myself!" Valla shouted as she somersaulted over a massive coil, slicing deep. "I did what I had to do. I survived."

She then found herself in a larger circular gallery that opened into a grander space beyond, an outer half ring fronted by rock columns, thin in the middle, wide at top and bottom. Her head pounded. The demon was driving harder.

*SCREAMS. DEATH. VILLAGE . . . PURGED.*

*FAMILY . . . PURGED.*

"You will not manipulate me as you did Delios!"

*BLOOD . . .*

*YES. BLOOD LIKE . . .*

*RIVER.*

"Enough! Face me, and let's have done with this!"

*THE EYE SEES.*

*I SEE YOU.*

The thunder of the water was more distant in this area, and Valla thought briefly that she heard a little girl's giggle. She saw movement in the outer ring and gave chase.

The curved chamber led to another tunnel, another bend, and she was again surrounded by darkness, her feet making squishing sounds in the black ooze on the ground, and then . . . the roar of the river muffled all other noise.

She was circling back around toward the water. A form, a light haze that seemed to be a head peeking from behind a corner, appeared and was gone.

Valla rounded the bend and saw briefly what looked like a child. The



hellspawn must have brought one of the children down here with it . . . to use as a mortal shield.

The figure ran. Valla pursued. They were drawing closer to the river. Valla could see now that it was a girl. A girl with long blonde hair.

*THUNDER. RAIN.*

The child stopped and stood eerily still. Valla slowed her approach, ready for any surprise, her heart hammering within her chest.

*SISTER.*

The girl turned, and Valla saw Halissa's features.

*RIVER. RUNNING. MIND BROKEN.*

It couldn't be Halissa, of course. But it looked so very much like her. This girl was pale, as pale as death. Her waterlogged skin had begun to fall away in strips. One eye bulged.

Valla froze. The pain in her head was unbearable. But the wall that had blocked her from the memory obscured since before her arrival, that wall was crumbling.

And she remembered . . .

*YES.*

She remembered the night Halissa ran, maddened, completely unhinged by weeks of nightmares and living like an animal, tormented by the carnage she had witnessed. She remembered chasing her through the storm.

The little girl in the cave smiled, and the claw of a black crab reached out.

Halissa had slipped, and Valla's heart had turned to ice. Halissa had stretched forth her hand, and Valla had taken it . . .

But the rain-soaked grip could not be held. Halissa had screamed once and was gone.

*BURIED IT, YOU TRIED. BURIED SO DEEP. BUT THE EYE SEES.*

*NO GOOD DREAMS FOR YOU.*

Valla dropped to her knees before the girl in the cave. A black tentacle squirmed out of the rushing river, sliding snakelike across the floor. It closed around Valla's arm and pulled. One of her daggers fell from cold fingers. It didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered.

*WHY THE CHILDREN? CHILDREN ARE HOPE. I AM THE DESTROYER OF HOPE. I AM THE TERROR OF MURDER BY THE BELOVED. I AM THE RAGE OF INNOCENCE LOST.*

*Destruction begets Terror as Terror begets Hate as Hate begets Destruction—*

YES.

*DELIOS. SO MUCH HATE IN THAT ONE.*

*BENEATH IT ALL A SCARED BOY. EAGER TO DESTROY.*

She felt the stone rough against her as she was drawn to the river's edge.

*YOU ARE MINE NOW.*

But there was one more piece of the missing memory.

She remembered the campfire.

The tentacle pulled her under. Another reached up and grasped her free arm. The water was much deeper here. Valla closed her eyes, unwilling yet to let out the last of her breath. What final piece was left?

The campfire. The mental exercises. She had buried the recollection of Halissa's death. But why?

*Remember.*

So the demon would go searching for it. In her mind's eye, Valla saw the infiltration as hundreds of smoky tendrils.

*When a demon peers into you, into the deepest recesses of your mind, then you may peer back if you know how.*

Valla imagined her consciousness locking on to a tendril, following it back to its source . . .

*WHAT IS THIS?*

*It is the most dangerous thing a demon hunter can do.*

Her consciousness invaded the presence that had so deeply latched on to her. A malignant red eye dominated her mental vision. She pressed toward it, seeking. Her surroundings were alive with squirming, crawling things. But as she probed deeper, as her insistence mounted . . . they took form.

With a sudden clarity, she understood what she faced.

Valla's eyes opened beneath the water. And there in the inky depths . . .

They burned like fire.

*I see YOU.*

She felt the presence retreating from within her mind, felt the grip on her arms loosen. She slashed outward with her remaining dagger, slicing the tentacles. The river threatened to sweep her away . . . but not this time. The river would take nothing else from her.

*Olphastos is not even your true, cursed name.*

Valla kicked toward the surface and dug her fingers into the rocky ledge. She pulled herself up, and the corpse of Halissa, a look of fear now upon its

face, took a step back.

*I see you, Valdraxxis—foot soldier. Outcast. Derelict.*

The dead girl turned and ran.

*During the wars against the Prime Evils, you led a failed campaign. Maligned and scorned . . . you once were a demon of import in the Hells but now are considered anathema even to your kind.*

*I . . .*

Something shambled out of the darkness to her right, something that might have at one time been a toad, malformed now, bloated, with massive lambent eyes. It reached for her.

*I WILL NOT BE DENIED.*

Valla bit down on her dagger, dug into a pouch under her jerkin, and was happy to find that her bolas were still there.

She cast a bola, which wrapped around an amphibian arm. The creature raised the appendage to its face, staring at the rope and spheres stupidly.

The bola exploded, vaporizing the thing's arm and taking the head with it as Valla grabbed the dagger from her mouth and stalked after the little girl.

Not really the corpse of Halissa, just a form taken by the demon to weaken her.

*It is you who are weak now, lapdog.*

More things came from recesses in the walls, monstrous things; the first scuttled sideways and swung a single massive claw. Valla vaulted above the creature and drove her dagger through its carapace. The fiend's legs buckled beneath it. She retrieved one of her crossbows.

Another aberration lunged. Valla fired one bolt that shattered something resembling an arm, then shot a second through a bulbous eye, moving all the while, chasing the impostor of her sister. She tossed her dagger and drew her second crossbow.

A long passage greeted her. The walls came alive as countless insects—roaches, centipedes, beetles . . . a slick, wet tide of pestilence—surged toward her almost as one.

The demon hunter stopped, took a knee, and fired multiple bolts from both crossbows. There were several small explosions. She felt the heat on her face, and when the flames dissipated, the squirming host was little more than a slimy paste on the walls. The rest she crushed as she sprinted forward.

Valla rounded a bend, but what she saw was no longer the little girl.

It was a mirror image of herself. Valla stepped up, removing the crimson bolt from beneath her leather. The mirror-Valla opened her mouth, and a thick black sludge bubbled out, pouring down her chin. Runnels of the substance bled from her nostrils. The scar on her jaw split apart and ooze seeped through. Her eyes filled with the black liquid, and the mirror-Valla cried tears of demon blood.

*No. That is not me. That will not be me.*

The mirror-Valla darted away past a darkened alcove, around a massive stone pillar. The demon hunter followed, crossbows prepared to fire. She rounded the pillar, spun, and dropped to one knee, speaking . . .

“I see you, minion of the Burning Hells . . .”

She spoke the words even as the demon emerged from the alcove, swinging a thick arm that ended with a chitinous serrated blade, a strike that would have surely beheaded the sawyer’s daughter an instant before.

“In the name of all those who have suffered, I cast you out!”

The demon was a hulking monstrosity. Its body was like those of the creatures that existed deep below the sea, where light never reached. Tumescant black tentacles served as legs. Its upper torso was covered in an armor-like shell bursting with spiky protrusions, and the entirety of the nightmarish thing was coated in a viscous, midnight-hued ooze.

“Begone and be damned, and may you never return!”

A massive red eye with a narrow slit stared back at her. The slit widened as Valla fired the crimson bolt.

The bolt struck the eye, popping it like a grape. The runes on the shaft of the bolt glowed, and there was an explosion of light.

. . .

The weather had started to turn cold.

Valla stood, hood down, looking at the large wooden cross that marked Halissa’s grave. Several weeds had sprouted since she was last here. The graves of her parents, where she had finally buried what remained of them, were here as well, and surrounding them were the burial sites of all the other villagers who had been butchered.

Josen approached but stayed silent, the light breeze stirring his cloak.

Valla knelt and began pulling weeds.

“Word from the village,” Josen said, his tone irritatingly even, as always. “All is . . . as well as can be expected, given the circumstances. The children are themselves once again, with no memory of their actions . . . though many of them will grow up without parents. Bellik and others are offering their homes to the orphaned.”

Valla set her jaw. “Good.”

Josen shifted his weight slightly. “There is word also that the townspeople are . . . thankful.”

The sawyer’s daughter rose, glancing at Josen as she did so. There were three gashes, still healing, across the left side of his face.

“What of Delios?” Valla asked.

“Taken care of,” Josen replied. Valla waited for further explanation. The master hunter only eyed her impassively.

“I’ve heard whisperings . . .” she said. “Premonitions from those gifted with precognitive ability . . . that a star will fall in Tristram seven days from now.”

Josen’s eyes took Valla’s measure. “You heard true. The falling star is believed to be a sign of the Prophecy. The others have asked that I send our best hunter to investigate.”

Valla pulled an item from beneath her armor. A moment of silence passed between them, broken finally by Josen.

“What you did—”

“Was a gamble. But it worked.”

The sawyer’s daughter unfolded the letter she had written in Havenwood, bent down, and placed it before the grave, setting a rock atop it. “Told you I’d come visit,” she whispered.

She stood and looked at her mentor.

“Everything’s a test, you’re fond of saying. Life is a test. I failed at the ruins . . . but this is a test I passed. And I learned much from it. I learned that we truly can be our own worst enemies. But I also learned that no matter how much the demons may destroy, they cannot destroy hope.”

The setting sun reflected in Valla’s eyes. “It may be effective for you to simply turn off your emotions, but that is not my way. It was liberating, for a time, to live with the promise of a different life. To live a contented lie.”

*How easy it would be to go back to living that lie,* Valla thought. Josen stared at her with that appraising gaze of his.

Valla went on, “It was a good dream . . . but for now it must remain just that

—a dream.”

The sawyer’s daughter pulled her hood up. “I’m back. I’m back, and I’m ready . . . to continue the hunt.”

She turned away.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Josen asked flatly.

“Tristram. The others asked you to send the best. I am the best. I’m going, and you have less than a few heartbeats to try and stop me.”

Valla waited with her back to the master hunter, then lifted her scarf . . . An instant later she strode away, crested a rise, and was gone from sight.

Josen watched, and if there had been an observer present, that person would have witnessed an anomaly: something playing at the master hunter’s lips, something that resembled . . . a smile.







## Fear

His dead sister came at sundown. Always at sundown.

As the sky bruised and the shadows grew long into night, he stood to watch the sun disappear behind the mountains. This was when the whispered sound of the evening breeze would crumble into the slow, shuffling rasp of feet. Her feet . . . cold and white, frayed tendon and cracked bone worn bare over countless miles of frost-rimmed rock. It did not matter how far Kehr had traveled that day, how many rivers he had forded or cliffs he had scaled. She came at sundown.

The large man busied himself with the fire as the shuffling drew closer. Tinder had grown more plentiful as he had descended into the Sharval Wilds, and Kehr tried to find some comfort in the thought of warm food after weeks of dried venison. It was a futile attempt at cheer, as he knew it would be. The limping footsteps always brought a seeping chill, a liquid sense of ice and horror that rippled and lapped against his skin. They came to a stop in the darkness just beyond the firelight.

Kehr did not want to look up; he did not want to address her. But she wouldn't leave until he did. He waited as the fire built up to a crackling blaze, and then he straightened, sighing heavily into the cold twilight air.

"Say your words, Faen. Say them and go."

She took a dragging step into the firelight, then another. Kehr stared into the flames, felt his hand move to the tender scar on his chest. One more step, and she was across from him. A log in the fire shifted, popped, and sent



embers floating upward. Kehr forced his gaze to follow the bright specks, to lift from the fire and regard this thing that had been his sister. He owed her that.

The heat was already thawing her pale flesh, and the sickly sweet smell of decay grew strong. Following after her brother these long weeks had wrought havoc on Faen's gray, shambling form, and Kehr barely recognized her.

Her eyes were black pits, sunken shadows in place of the cornflower blue he remembered. All that remained of his sister's golden tresses hung in matted ashen clumps from the sides of her skull, and the sodden weight of one of those tangled clots was pulling the skin loose. He watched as the yellow flesh tore, dropping rotted tissue and hair to the ground in a wet thump. Her thin limbs rattled in the wind, skeletal knobs protruding from damp parchment. Kehr wondered if Faen still felt anything. She leaned forward to point at his chest with a bony, trembling finger.

"Kehr. Kehr Odwyll."

How could she speak with that ruined mouth? The collapsed jaw, the black tongue so swollen and stiff that it pushed through her tattered cheek? How could she be here, shaking with morbid anger after being buried under the broken granite face of Arreat these many years? Kehr knew he should not have returned, knew there was no atonement for him in these fractured lands. He had not been able to find his way to the wooded canyons of his people and had spent long days wandering aimlessly through strange and jagged hills. The valley of the Stag tribe had been a place once green and welcome and familiar. Now everything was changed. Everything was lost.

But Faen had found him. Had found him and followed him as he ran.

"Kehr Odwyll. Traitor. Traitor!"



## Sister

The morning sun came too soon, and the fire had failed to keep the chill from Kehr's bones. He pushed his thick bearskin cloak aside and rose, stretching his

full eight feet of scar and muscle. Over the years, Kehr had adopted the practice common in the Skovos Isles of removing hair from both face and head with a sharp blade. The custom made sense in those warm summer lands, had made him seem less an outsider. But here the cold wind felt foreign on his naked skin. It had taken only a few weeks under these winter skies for Kehr to yearn for the untamed beard and long tresses of his youth. He ran rough fingers over the stubble on his jaw and wondered if Tehra would recognize him.

Thoughts of his mistress still brought a sick pang that burrowed through his chest. It wasn't sorrow or guilt or pining—not entirely. It was the pain of a mistake swaddled in calloused tissue and regret, a mistake that could never be changed, could only be wrapped more tightly in an effort to numb the hurt or at least distance it. Kehr shook his head.

The journey back would be a long one. The Gulf of Westmarch lay beyond the Kohl Mountains to the south, and from there Kehr knew that he would be able to find passage around the peninsula on a trading barge. Merchants were always willing to hire muscle to watch after their cargo so they could visit the brothels along their route. Kehr spoke the trading languages of Therat, Lut Gholein, and the islands; he could easily convince a potential employer that, in spite of his size, he was not one of those wild primitives from the Dreadlands but a more civilized breed of sellsword. After that, it should be easy sailing down past Westmarch and Kingsport, then to Philios. And there . . . well, there she awaited his return. There were rolling hills and light music; there were wine and meat and laughter and warm, slender arms. There he could forget duty and the cold, grinding sense of regret.

Why had he come here? To find his people? To beg their pardon? Well, they had found him. Or at least Faen had.

Kicking dirt over the smoldering remains of his fire, Kehr tried to push the memory of last night from his mind and focus on the coming trek. The peaks ahead were formidable, but they were forested, inhabited, alive—a welcome change from the dead . . . a welcome change after the past few weeks. Kehr's hand went to his chest.

He was not betraying anyone this time, he told himself. He was not shirking his duty, for those who marked such things were gone. He was leaving an empty land that no longer held claim to him. Kehr had hoped to make amends, to find some way to end this gnawing guilt. Instead he had found

echoing silence and a cold new dimension of disgrace that twisted in his gut with each visit from Faen. The same thought sounded over and over in his head: he was not betraying anybody now. Not this time.

Beyond the next rise, Kehr knew he would come across the winding hunter's track that he had followed two months ago on his journey here. Then it would be a simple case of joining larger trails that crisscrossed up the north face of the Kohl until he reached the Iron Path.

The Iron Path. It was an ancient road, the crumbling vestige of a lost empire that had stretched from the deserts of Aranoch to the Frozen Sea. Paved with broad rust-hued blocks of ferrous shale, the Iron Path ran wide and true from the frosty reaches of Ivgorod, across the spine of the Kohl Mountains, and down to the western foothills of Khanduras. Once a vital thoroughfare for trade and imperial troops, it made passage through the tall, serrated mountains a matter of weeks instead of months. Best of all, the path fell into disuse long centuries ago. It was now largely abandoned and forgotten; northern kings, chiefs, and warlords had few dealings with their neighbors in these chaotic times. The destruction of Arreat had wrought fear into the hearts of the surrounding nations, and most chose to close their gates, strengthen their walls, and let the world grow savage at their borders.

This meant that the path would be empty of travelers and bandits. Although Kehr could handle both, he preferred to walk in solitude. Lifting his massive greatsword, Scorn, across his shoulders, he turned and strode toward the waiting hills.

Ten days of hard travel passed. Ten sunsets, ten more visits from his sister. One of her arms had been chewed off by scavengers, and her skull was now bare, yellowing bone. But it was still Faen. Still her voice. Still her condemnation. He wondered if he would ever grow accustomed to the revulsion, to the horror of her presence. He wondered if he should.

Kehr worried that Faen might follow him across the Twin Seas, that she might pursue him clear to Philios. There was an idea in the back of his mind, one that fought to be heard: what if he struck her down? What if he drove his mighty blade through her, rendered that trembling frame into a pile of splintered bone and spoiled flesh? Would it free her from this torment? Would it free *him*?

Kehr pulled the bearskin tight around his shoulders. No. He could not do this to Faen, to his sister. He had earned her words, earned her hate. He was

worthy of these stripes.

Shaking the darkness from his head, the large man took solace in his long strides and the earth pulling past his feet. Whether it was from his need to leave these lands or his desire to return to a more welcome clime, he was traveling this leg of the journey at an impressive pace. The Iron Path was just ahead, and he knew that his gait would grow quicker once he reached that even paving. Soon this would all be forgotten. Soon this would be behind him, and maybe Faen would remain here in the frigid bleakness, where the dead belonged.

Kehr sighed, tried to turn his thoughts toward wine, sunlight, and the measured sound of waves against sand. His stomach growled. He had eaten the last of his dried meat two days ago, and game was scarcer than Kehr had hoped. His focus had been on leaving this land, on leaving his fallen home with as great a speed as he could muster. Some effort, he realized, must be made in finding food.

In five breaths, his reverie was cut off by a scream . . . then *screams*. They were coming from the road ahead, just through a copse of the hardy scrub oak that rimmed the Iron Path at these lower altitudes. Kehr crouched low and stepped away from the trail he had been following, circling around the trees to get a better vantage.

They were refugees; that much was obvious. Men, women, children—dozens of thin, unwashed peasants in threadbare clothing, carrying their few belongings in baskets, in satchels, even wrapped in blankets. Like Kehr, the refugees had assumed that the road would be vacant. Unlike him, however, they traveled heedlessly. They had formed a straggling line along the path with no thought of prowling beasts, bandits, or worse. And there were many things worse than bandits in the surrounding mountains.

Kehr smelled them before they came into view, and his stomach turned. Khazra. Shaggy, misshapen fiends twisted into a perverse crossing of man and goat. Often traveling in packs, khazra were broad and muscular, their long arms corded with tangled sinew that slid and bunched beneath a coarse, filthy pelt. The goatmen's legs bent backward at a bestial angle and ended in cloven black hooves. Khazra shoulders were a gathering of taut animal brawn, tortured veins culminating in the jutting, nightmare head of a large goat buck with inky slit eyes and curling horns. Kehr had faced these beasts before—several times in his southern wanderings—and the memories tasted of bile.

Khazra bore tangible, reeking witness to the vile work of demons in men.

Kehr spied a pair of the goatmen moving along the road with hungry intent as the refugees scattered, screaming. Already, a score of bodies lay strewn across the path, frail clumps marked in red. More khazra slunk from corpse to corpse, stripping the dead of their meager rags. Kehr felt his unease building into anger, but he swallowed it. This was not his fight. Not his duty. It would only slow his journey, and there was little he could do at this point. He owed nothing to these peasants, these fools who had traveled on an open road without weapons. Kehr had no vigil here.

He was about to turn and circle back around when he saw the woodcutter. Dressed in homespun brown, his pack of tinder littering the worn pavement, the man had attracted the attention of the fiends. He stood alone with his simple axe held high as they surrounded him, laughing with those mewling, fleshy voices. The goatmen were armed with rough pikes and spears, and they alternated jabbing at the poor man whenever his back was to them. He was spotted with blood in a dozen places. The other refugees took the opportunity to escape into the nearby trees, abandoning the woodcutter to what promised to be a long and agonizing death. He spun to counter a vicious thrust, and Kehr saw what he carried in his other arm. It was a child.



## Life

Aron had given up hope, unsure if he could hold the axe steady for another second, when a roar shivered the air. The monsters turned in bleating surprise as a storm of rumbling steel fury burst through them. Staggering backward, Aron lifted his axe and pulled his arm more tightly around the girl, praying that this new demon might perhaps bring a quicker death.

Then the goatmen in front of him fell apart, dropped into spurting pieces, and Aron saw this latest threat. His breath escaped him.

It was a *man*. A giant of a man who towered over even these hulking things.

A man who stood dripping in hot blood that steamed in the cold morning air. He wore a bearskin cloak across mountainous shoulders, and his legs were girded with piecemeal armor of mismatched plate and mail. Heavy oxhide boots. Chest bare and scarred. Thick hands, knotted and rough, were wound around the haft of a terrible weapon that matched his size. It was easily three times the length of Aron's axe, forged of angry black metal and notched along both sides of its uneven blade. It was a coarse and brutal tool of death, held aloft as though it were part of the man's own arm.

This could only be a barbarian. Aron had heard tales of barbarians even in his remote village on the eastern foothills. Tales of gigantic savages who guarded the sacred mountain and ate those who chose to trespass. But never had he imagined the truth: that such incredible strength could exist in a living, breathing mortal. Such feral quickness and power bent to the will of a man.

The khazra who had been stripping the corpses down the road now dropped their scraps and made shrill calls, pillars of vapor lifting from between yellow goat teeth. More khazra appeared on the side of the path; those who had chased the fleeing refugees into the brush had returned at the sound. Aron counted seven, eight beasts in total, their courage building as they bleated in response, eyeing their lone target. Heads lowered, they gathered into a brutish cluster and charged.

The barbarian took a breath through his teeth, shifting the massive blade so he could extend a hand to Aron.

"Your axe."

Aron hastily handed it to the man. It seemed such a frail thing in that meaty paw. Raising it to his eyes, the barbarian nodded approvingly.

"Sturdy. Not meant for sticks."

The goatmen began to gain speed, their hooves hammering sharp beats on the stone. This barbarian wished to discuss a wood axe while death bore down on them? What kind of madman was this?

"Yes . . . I mean, no, no—it belonged to my father," stammered Aron. "He was a militiaman with the—"

In one fluid movement, the barbarian lifted his arm and then hurled the axe forward. Aron watched as it spun end over end, a steel blur that smashed *through* the skull of the nearest khazra and buried itself in the chest of the one behind him. The first creature tumbled ahead, the grim mess above his shoulders spouting dark blood, while the second tripped into him and was

still. The remaining monsters slowed, spreading to encircle their target as they drew close.

Aron scrambled toward the fallen body of a creature who had attacked him earlier, hoping to grab his spear and perhaps help this barbarian make a valiant stand before they were overwhelmed. The large man snarled and kicked him in the hip, knocking him over. Aron rolled to protect the child, looking back in fear.

“Stay down.”

Aron ducked low and kept his arm tight around his charge. She had stopped crying, which worried him, but perhaps it would be better if she had fainted. The goatmen had surrounded them, and foam ran from the beasts’ craggy mouths. They were furious, and Aron knew from recent, horrific experience that they would take apart their prey with carnal zeal. The barbarian pulled his blade in close, arms bent, and Aron could see his muscles bunch with latent force.

The goatmen’s patience broke, and they attacked with mewling cries. Aron glanced up and saw the barbarian close his eyes, and—by the Burning Hells!—*he smiled*. Then the big man leaned back, and the smile twisted into a sneer as he spun in a black arc toward the coming fiends. Aron cringed as the heavy weapon hummed over his head in a wash of cold air. The monsters had been deceived by their foe’s inhuman reach, and the nearest four were caught within the fatal moaning crescent. It didn’t cut—it *smote* through the beasts without pause, severing spines, shattering bones, tearing flesh, and splattering a crimson spray over Aron, filling his ears, nose, mouth, and eyes with hot, salty red. The woodcutter rubbed blood from his face, coughing. Where four goatmen had been, eight limp, quivering shapes were now spread over the road. The barbarian was down on one knee, breathing hard, his arms bent around to the side where the blade had lodged deep into a block of the paving shale. The two remaining khazra, cleverer than their brethren, had waited for the barbarian to commit himself so, and they crowed as they drove toward his blind back.

Aron tried to shout, tried to warn the man of their advance, but he choked on curdling blood. The barbarian crouched low and then surged upward, hefting his sword and the massive stone in which it was embedded out of the ground, swinging around in a curve and smashing into the oncoming beasts. The rock hewed through their meaty forms like a hammer through lard,

mashing them flat and cracking asunder with a mighty boom. Wet shards the size of fists whistled past Aron's shoulders.

And then . . . it was done. Silent. The barbarian stood triumphant in the mountain air, a chiseled god of blood and death and rage. Aron had never seen anything so terrifying, and he feared what the arrival of this imposing figure could mean. He watched as the man turned and shouldered his weapon to walk a short distance down the road. Was he leaving? No. He bent down to pull Aron's axe from the gore-soaked chest it had rent, and then he returned. He extended the haft and nodded.

"The path will be safe for you now. Khazra do not come twice against a stronger foe. Word travels quickly amongst these scavengers."

Aron reached out to take the axe and stopped. The bundle in his arm was still. Still and growing cold. Only then did he notice the dark, wet mark where a spear had passed his defenses.

Aron dropped his head.

"No . . . no, no."

Weeping, he held her tight and stumbled to his knees. The barbarian watched and thought he understood.

"I saw how you protected her, woodsman. You could have done no more to save your child." He spat, nodding toward the refugees quietly returning to the road. "You did a father's duty."

"No," said Aron, his voice breaking. "She is not mine. I tried to carry her to safety when the goatmen attacked, when her parents were killed. She is not my daughter."



## Death

Kehr walked with the refugees. They had pleaded for his protection, offered him food and a few pieces of silver in exchange for his company. The barbarian had taken their meager payment and curtly agreed to escort them. As far as



Kehr was concerned, the poor folk were already dead, or they would be once their path diverged from his. He was just sharing the road, but he would fight for these people until the Iron Path dipped into Khanduras. Would Faen still pursue him if he traveled with others? He hoped not, but he decided to spend tonight's sunset alone so they could not hear her; there was no point in frightening the refugees any further. Regardless, it would be some small comfort to walk amid living voices for a time. For their part, the peasants kept their distance from the man, unsure of their silent companion but unwilling to fall too far behind his long strides.

"You are a barbarian, yes?"

It was the woodcutter. Kehr had lost track of the man after he had left to bury the unknown child, and the barbarian had not heard his approach just now. Increasing his pace, Kehr grumbled assent.

"I thought so. Who else could match blows with these monsters? Who else could wield a farmer's plow like a falchion?" The woodcutter shook his head, smiling.

Kehr frowned. Perhaps he was wrong about the comfort of living voices. It had been long weeks since he had last shared words with a man . . . or had them shared *at* him at such measure. He wondered if conversations had always seemed so light and empty. That said, he was impressed with the woodsman's perception. Scorn had indeed been forged from a plow blade. Kehr rolled his shoulders, heard the thick leather straps securing the weapon to his back creak under the strain.

The peasant took a few quick steps ahead, trying to catch Kehr's eye. "I doubted at first. You lack the wild beard and locks mentioned in the tales . . ."

He cleared his throat.

"If you do not want to speak, I understand. I wanted only to thank you."

Tilting his head in a bow, he let the barbarian stride past. Kehr continued on, but almost against his wishes he found himself intrigued by this woodcutter. Here was a man who had stood to defend a stranger's child when others ran, a man who had chosen to express gratitude while others cowered. Such mettle was impressive, especially among the common folk. Kehr turned to see where the woodcutter had gone, and the barbarian was startled to find him only a few paces behind.

"You tread softly, woodsman. You learned this while hunting trees?"

The smaller man laughed; it was a surprisingly warm sound in this place.

“We did not have these *khazra* in the woods when I was a boy, but that did not mean it was safe to go stomping about. It is hard to gather tinder when running from bears.”

Kehr nodded. The explanation made sense, but he suspected there was more to the woodcutter than he let on. Some men kept secrets, the barbarian knew, and looked away.

“This is the first you have seen of the goatmen?”

“Well, never in these numbers. Over the last couple of years, we saw them from time to time, scavenging in herds of three or four, usually at higher elevations, where their hooves allow them to move at great speed. We considered them dangerous, but they tended to shy away from armed men on level ground. But now . . . now they are everywhere along the Kohl, from the peaks to the foothills.”

He tightened his grip on the axe, and Kehr could see dark thoughts pass over the woodcutter’s eyes. “They . . . they seem to have organized themselves. Never before have they shown such coordination, such initiative. They began attacking the more remote villages. Seven days ago, I spotted a horde of the monsters moving up the valley toward our township of Dunsmott. I was able to warn my people, and we grabbed what we could, slipping away as the sun fell. Following the Iron Path, we joined with others. Others with the same tale.

“We are the vanguard”—the woodsman swept his arm around to indicate the pauper’s caravan straggling behind him—“of what will soon become an unending line of displaced folk looking for refuge if something is not done to stop these attacks.”

This claim gave Kehr pause.

“Nothing will be *done* about the *khazra*, woodsman. These mountains are borderlands; no king rules them, and no king protects them. Get your people down from the Kohl, down to safety. And then stay there.”

The smaller man slowed as he took in what Kehr had said, and he set his mouth in a grim smile. He seemed to come to some decision, and he reached out his hand.

“We are mountain folk, but that does not mean we are fools. Our intent is to follow this road and then continue down to the lowlands of Westmarch . . . and there we will start anew, I suppose. My name is Aron.”

The woodcutter—Aron—kept his hand extended until Kehr finally growled and snatched it in his own calloused fist. The barbarian gave a perfunctory

shake, then let go.

“I am Kehr Odwyll, last of the Stag tribe.”

“Last?”

“My people are no longer. Arreat took them in her fury.”

“I am . . . I am sorry. I can imagine no greater loss than to be separated from your people. That is why, regardless of the danger, I sojourn with these.” Aron gestured toward the refugees.

Kehr and the woodcutter walked a dozen steps more.

“But . . .” mused Aron, “how did you survive the destruction? News of the mountain’s ruin reached even my humble village. What miracle kept you alive?”

Kehr did not answer. He fixed his eyes on the Iron Path and lengthened his stride until he had outpaced Aron. Some men kept secrets, the barbarian knew, and looked away.

The sun was getting lower in the sky, and the ragged caravan at Kehr’s back would soon be setting up camp for the night. The peasants were far behind him now, but still the barbarian climbed into the rocks away from the road. It might not be necessary . . . but he had to be sure.

Faen came that evening. Her jaw had been lost in the journey, leaving her black tongue dangling wet against the tangled cords of her throat flesh. But her words were the same. The horror was the same. Kehr had hoped that traveling with these people would turn her away. He had hoped that protecting them would redeem him in her sunken eyes. He had even hoped—dared to hope—that she was somehow all in his mind, a result of his festering guilt. Yet the cold felt so sharp and liquid, crawling up his arms, his shoulders. That was real. The icy heat of Faen’s staggering rage was undiminished.

Kehr knew he would spend the evenings of this journey apart from Aron and his people.



**Traitor**

Kehr had been wrong about the goatmen. He staved off another two attacks the next morning, and three more refugees died in the bloodshed. Seven khazra decorated the Iron Path with their corpses, and Aron began to worry about how many curved horns lay between him and Westmarch. The khazra would try quick ambushes whenever the barbarian moved too far ahead of the group.

Their fears amplified, the peasants now walked in a huddled band just ten paces behind their protector. Aron followed the small caravan of twenty souls, his axe drawn and ready, and a few of the hardier men and women gathered arms from fallen pursuers. This formation proved effective against the cowardly beasts, and there were no more attacks that day.

Kehr helped the refugees erect a defensible camp, and then—despite their protests—he left them as the sun slid behind the western peaks. He claimed that he wished to survey the surrounding hills, to study potential attack locations for the coming day.

Aron could tell that Kehr was lying. And he saw dread in the barbarian's face.

But Kehr returned not long after dark, much to the relief of the refugees. Aron sensed that something dire had taken place; the barbarian had brought a *coldness* back with him, a palpable chill that went deeper than the mountain air. It was as though the fading sun had pulled the heat and life from Kehr Odwyll, dragging them away as it had fallen behind the Kohl. The woodcutter judged it wise to stay quiet around the large man.

Aron handed him a sizeable portion of the food the peasants carried. The mayor's frowning widow had allotted the barbarian's share as the hungry refugees had looked on. Kehr took the offering without question, setting to it with silent intensity. Aron wondered how long the barbarian had gone since his last meal. And he wondered if the berries and small game the caravan gathered along the road would be enough to both sate Kehr's needs and allow the refugees to arrive in Westmarch before starvation set in.

Aron had spoken with the widow, a pinch-faced dowager named Seytha, when Kehr left at dusk. He had told her that the barbarian was not deliberately attempting to harm them; he was simply unaccustomed to traveling with such needy, unprepared charges. Despite his taciturn ways, Kehr had shown that he was committed to seeing the peasants to the end of their journey. The woman was unconvinced and had only looked through Aron, staring at the path

ahead.

The woodcutter took watch that evening with Daln, the swineherd. Armed with a crooked shovel, the old man had proved he was tougher and more resolute than many younger men. Daln had a stutter and seemed to be in a constant state of disbelief. After his threescore years of life within the same square mile of Dunsmott, this journey was harrowing and incomprehensible to him. There were no attacks that night, no signs of goatmen for the first time since the peasants had abandoned their homes. Daln asked, in his staccato words, what the barbarian had done at sunset to frighten the monsters away. He asked if Kehr had called down some icy god from the Dreadlands to protect the refugees. Aron told the old man to keep his mouth shut and his eyes on the road. *One does not question the branches of a fallen oak. One just collects them and is thankful.*

Two days became four, and then four more. The attacks were fewer but did not cease altogether. Aron could see the caravan's pursuers, usually a pair of scouts following along the peaks at either side of the road. Occasionally these khazra were joined by another two, and, encouraged by their numbers, they would abandon any attempt at secrecy. Aron felt this to be nearly as unnerving as the outright assaults: the constant presence of beastly shapes silhouetted against the ridgeline, the tapping sound of hooves on rock, the wind carrying the monsters' greasy calls across the way like the smell of spoiled meat.

Kehr's demeanor began to thaw as the Iron Path started its slow descent into the foothills, and Aron found the barbarian more amenable to conversation as long as the woodcutter kept his comments brief . . . and his questions few. Kehr seemed to find some comfort in talking of his people, and Aron learned of the Stag tribe, of its vigil, the sacred charge to protect Arreat. He also learned how this vigil had brought Kehr's people meaning, how it had sealed their connection with the animals of the mountain. It had been a covenant shared by all the barbarian tribes, the source of their spiritual strength.

In return, Kehr learned of the woodcutter's upbringing in the rustic mountain village of Dunsmott. Aron and his brother had been raised by their father after their mother had succumbed to illness. Aron's father, a veteran militiaman, had known almost nothing of nonmilitary matters, so he had trained his sons to be soldiers. It was a harsh life. So harsh, in fact, that Aron's brother had run off north to Ivgorod to study with the monks, never to be

heard from again. His father passed away not long after, handing down a humble cottage in the woods, a worn axe, and little regret. Aron was grateful that the old man hadn't lived to see his beloved Dunsmott surrendered and ransacked by these unholy beasts. It was a small blessing, a *kaelseff*. Aron often used these words, these pieces of the old tongue. Kehr scoffed at what he considered to be an affectation, at the woodcutter's "simple reverence for words from a useless language." Aron took no offense. He just smiled.

"Names have power, Kehr Odwyll," he said. "They have power to bind us."

Kehr grumbled and pulled his bearskin tight around his chest.

The party had gone several days without an attack, and spirits were lifting. Khazra scouts still followed at a distance, but everyone had grown accustomed to their presence and looked forward to the hopeful prospect of leaving them behind as Westmarch grew closer. Kehr predicted that it would be another day or two before the caravan was out of the mountains. Aron prayed that foraging would be more fruitful once the refugees reached the lowlands. He and a few of the hardier men and women were now giving their daily meal to the barbarian. Their stores were almost depleted.

The woodcutter's stomach growled as Kehr drew up and called a halt for the day. Aron leaned wearily against a boulder at the side of the road while others scurried to make camp. He noticed that the only people with any energy were those who had been fed: the young, the old, the wounded . . . and the barbarian. Aron knew that he should talk with Kehr, see if he could help him understand how things were being rationed. He decided to broach the subject tonight when the large man returned from his evening solitude.

Eyes locked on the sinking sun, mouth drawn in a grim line, Kehr kept his thoughts elsewhere. He finished his meal without a word and then set off on his nightly journey toward the fading light. After a full day's travel, there was still purpose in the barbarian's pace, the long strides that meant no man should follow.

Aron didn't have the vigor to pursue even if he wanted to. Lightheaded from hunger, he was startled when a woman's voice called out from behind him.

"Kehr Odwyll! If you should cross paths with one of your khazra tonight, please bring it back. Some of us perish for want of food and would not turn from eating the more goatish parts so that we may have the strength to walk the rest of the way!"

The barbarian came to a stop. Aron turned to see who would say such a thing. Perhaps hunger had made her thoughtless? It was Seytha, who served Kehr from the caravan's vanishing stock every night. She stood with her hands on her hips, her courage betrayed by a wet gleam in her eye.

Kehr had his back to the refugees, who had fallen still. His voice echoed up the canyon walls.

"Do the people of Dunsmott regret my service?"

Aron stumbled toward the barbarian, hands wide.

"No, Kehr! She did not mean—"

But Seytha spoke again, and it was clear that she had been chewing on these words all day. "We are starving in your shadow, barbarian. What does it matter if we die by a goatman's blade or by hunger?"

Aron heard angry murmurs of agreement, the sound of people who were tired and hungry . . . He cringed at what was starting to build into a rant against their protector. The woodcutter turned and faced them, trying to stem the tide before it got out of hand.

"This has been a hard journey for all of us, Seytha. The food must go to him because he needs the strength to stand against our attackers. Once we are out of these mountains, we will be able to hunt and—"

"We won't survive another two days if we don't find more to eat!" Her tone cut through the cold air like a knife. There were some gasps, and more voices were raised in anger. Daln pointed his shovel at the barbarian, who was now facing them.

"Why doesn't he bring us back s-something from his n-nightly hunts?" came the old man's warbling query. "We are not feeding him to ab-b-bandon us when he pleases. His d-duty is to keep us *alive*!"

Aron had been watching Kehr's response to the angry crowd. He seemed to be cut from stone, only flinching at one word: *duty*. Aron could see the muscles tighten in the big man's jaw and neck, the barbarian's breath misting the air in dangerous, smoldering clouds. Kehr turned toward the woodcutter, his voice burning like hot coals.

"I have been sellsword for sultans, for warlords, for merchant princes throughout the southern isles. Never have I bared steel for so little." He spat on the ground. "You people should have died on these mountains and will surely die when you reach the lowlands. Westmarch has khazra and worse. I should have left you on the Iron Path when I saw you. It would have been a mercy."

Desperate, Aron spread his arms.

“Please, Kehr. Forgive their hasty words; they are frightened and hungry and know not what they say. Do not leave us!”

Kehr Odwyll caught himself for a moment, his eyes resting on the forlorn man.

“You will live if you leave them behind, Aron. You have the skills to survive the journey. But if you stay with them, you will die with them.”

Then the barbarian strode into the waning light, accompanied by the pitiful pleading of the refugees. Aron turned toward his people and hefted his axe against his shoulder. Never had it felt so heavy.



## Brother

Kehr walked until the sight, the sound, and the smell of the pathetic commoners had disappeared into the growing shadows. The barbarian's blood boiled in sullen anger; his fists clenched, knuckles white. Did those fools not know who held their lives in hand? Did they realize how much they had slowed Kehr's journey, how they had cost him days of travel for a pittance of dry bread? How dare they?!

The sun crept quietly behind the mountains, and the barbarian's rage was scoured with bleak frustration. Roaring, he pulled Scorn from his back and, gripping it with both hands, flung it into the darkness.

“Come, Sister! Come and speak of my betrayal! Come with your black tongue and name me!”

He fell to his knees, and the shadows stole around him. Kehr closed his eyes as footsteps drew near. His sister would come whether or not he was protecting half-witted peasants. *What use is there in—*Kehr's breath froze in his throat.

The footsteps were many, *too many*, clicking sharply against the Iron Path.

“I am not your sister, but I name you,” came a voice, low and thick. *Bleating.*



"I name you fool and prey and, yes, traitor."

Kehr leapt to his feet and was knocked backward. The barbarian rolled and tried to come up, but several goatmen caught him in their fierce grips. He shook two of them off but was then hit from behind, and he lost feeling in his legs. More khazra piled on top of him, and everything started to go black.

"Enough! Bind the man. Bring him here!"

Kehr heard the clinking of chains and felt cold manacles pinch tightly around his wrists, cutting his skin. He was kicked, bitten, pulled roughly to his feet. A rib snapped. Blood ran down his back, his arms. Sounds, pain, anger—they all seemed to come from a distance.

"This road is ours, this Iron Path. You abandoned your sheep too late, barbarian."

Kehr lifted his head, blinked the hot wetness from his eyes. Before him stood a monstrous khazra twice the size of the largest goatman he had ever seen. Despite the haze of blood and pain, Kehr was surprised. This misbegotten thing was an abomination even by khazra standards. Hulking shoulders wound into broad arms that reached the ground with thorny knuckles, gray-violet skin scarred with vile letters, runes, and other characters that writhed across the tortured flesh with ersatz life. Instead of two spiraled horns, *four* sprouted from the knotted skull, branching forward like thick wooden tendrils and arching around the jutting jaw with an obscenely gentle curve. The horns were heavy, girded with iron, and carved with the same markings that decorated its skin. Dense black hair, matted with blood and crude dyes of green and brown, carpeted the legs down to cloven ebony hooves adorned with rugged nails. The monster raised its head back with a bleating laugh, and Kehr cringed; he saw flat, simian dugs hanging like dried fish, pierced with dull copper rings. This khazra was female.

She reached out, dragging her rough fingers across the top of the barbarian's head, his cheek, and his neck with clumsy tenderness. Kehr choked in revulsion. She chuckled, her fingers catching on his scarred chest.

"I am not the only one marked with godwords, eh?" She spoke in fetid tones that curdled around him, her breath sour and moist. She traced the scored lines running over his heart, marks he had kept hidden beneath his cloak.

"Ha! Do you not read?" And here she stepped back, lifting her arms to display her vibrant scars. "*My words bring strength. My words bring command and fire and power from our dark master. He who charged me to take this road*

scrawled these words across my flesh and made me queen!

“But *you*?” she chortled. “You bear *this*? Ha! Ha!”

In the growing shadow, Kehr saw that the matriarch’s markings did indeed give off an arcane light, a violet shimmer that danced just outside his blurred focus. She motioned to one of the goatmen behind him.

“Bring the others. Do not kill them yet. I wish for the sheep to see their coward protector!”

There was a mewling reply, and Kehr hung his head. *The others? Have the refugees fallen so quickly?* This question was followed by another thought, swift and sharp. *Of course they have.* He had abandoned them. Another betrayal.

More and more goatmen arrived. Two dozen, three. Each showed obeisance to the matriarch, to the vile queen. Some brought bloody sacrifices, unrecognizable and dripping parts of beasts or men, which she sniffed and either stuffed down her toothy mouth or threw back. The smell of filth and goat blood filled the air.

Meanwhile, the khazra holding Kehr’s arms hurled him to the ground and dragged him until he was lying at her cracked hooves. She squatted and caressed his body, hissing and dispensing edicts to her fawning subjects while they built a roaring fire in the center of the road. She crooned softly, and her horned nails scratched along his spine. Again, Kehr felt breath hot on his neck.

“You . . .” she whispered, “you might serve as a satisfying mount for a time. A chained barbarian pet will make a fine trophy for the queen of the Bone clan.”

Kehr tried to spit, but his mouth was dry.

There were cries in the distance, horribly familiar. He heard Aron’s voice raised in anger, then pain. The khazra parted, and the refugees were herded into view. They were terrified; some were sobbing. Aron was pulled behind them by two goatmen, bloody and unarmed, still struggling. A tall black-horned khazra—one obviously favored by the matriarch—came before her. He carried Aron’s axe in his hands.

“This one. He . . . he fight. He kill some of us.” The goatman’s words were hard to understand, his speech slurred and slow from using a language not intended for his long bovid jaw and teeth. He lacked his mistress’s intelligence, magically induced or otherwise.

The matriarch chuckled.

“Ha! We have found another wolf amongst the sheep! Bring him to me.”

Aron was shoved forward, and he stumbled to his knees. Kehr could tell that the woodcutter's arm was broken by the way he held it, and his mouth was trickling blood. Aron dragged himself to his feet, and then his eyes met Kehr's and went wide.

"What? I thought you escaped. How did they—"

"Ha!" cried the gloating matriarch, delighted. "He begins to doubt now."

Aron was staring at the monstrous shape of this khazra queen, but her words shook him. His eyes darted back down to Kehr, where he lay prone at her hooves. She laughed again.

"Your protector? Your savior? This coward, he knew you were doomed. He took your food and then ran when he saw the ambush was upon you. He saw us and threw away his sword!"

Aron drew a shaky breath.

"No. No, he protected us. He . . . he slayed your—"

"Useless scouts. Weaklings. Drudges I sent to keep you moving on the road. Keep you moving to *me*."

She reached down to stroke Kehr's shoulder lovingly.

"Your easy faith in this traitor, so like your kind. No wonder these mountains, they cry for my whip, cry to shrug free of these mice *infesting* every canyon. They beg to be the throne for the Bone clan."

The goatmen cheered, and weapons were raised in unison. The matriarch knew how to stir her people.

Aron was angry, his pain now forgotten. He stepped toward Kehr, fists clenched.

"You starved us for this? You feigned honor and courage for our bread only to run when real danger loomed?"

Aron spit on Kehr in a wet trail of blood and saliva.

"Sultans? Lords? You betrayed our trust for your khazra whore!"

The matriarch guffawed. Kehr struggled to sit upright.

"No. Woodcutter. Aron. I guarded you well . . . I did not know this—"

The queen grabbed Kehr by the wrists and yanked him to his feet. Her sorcerous tattoos shimmered with vicious light, feeding arcane strength into arms already craggy with muscle. The barbarian gasped as he was lifted into the air, arms stretched tight out to the sides, the long chains dangling from his manacles like metal ribbons.

"Look, little man. Your protector is marked! Ha! You ignorant hill folk had a

warning writ clear across his chest. This one is named traitor!”

Aron narrowed his eyes. The woodcutter was trembling with rage. “Kill me if you will, khazra. But I would have this traitor’s blood.”

Now the matriarch’s laughter grew to a howl, and the other khazra joined in with milky chuckles.

“Yes! Yes! Kill this barbarian, little man. Kill him, and perhaps I let you go to spread word of the Bone clan in the lowlands.

“Gherbek!” she called to her favored goatman. “Give the woodcutter his axe. Let him cut us some branches!”

The khazra slunk forward, extending the weapon. “Something for you, weakling,” he crooned.

Aron took the axe with his good hand and used it as a cane, limping toward the barbarian. Kehr could see he was gravely wounded; the woodcutter’s own blood ran down the shaft and the blade, leaving pools on the ground behind him. The matriarch lowered Kehr into Aron’s reach as if she were offering a toy to a child. Aron raised his axe and placed the edge shakily against the barbarian’s chest.

“This scar,” he growled to Kehr. “Were you marked for a traitor? Tell me true, barbarian. Tell me true this one time.”

Kehr dropped his head. His voice was low and heavy with shame.

“Yes. I abandoned my people while they warred with the reavers of Entsteig. I left my duty, and I left to follow a woman—the daughter of a passing merchant. I am a traitor. A coward. Worse, the Stag tribe was brought down with Arreat’s fall before I could return and beg forgiveness.”

Kehr lifted his face, a face tight with grief.

“When I could not find them, I marked *myself* a traitor, woodsman. Cut my own flesh. Scored it with a knife white-hot from the fire. Still they curse me for returning; still they reject my penance. My dead sister . . . she haunts me every night at sundown. They will not forgive. They never will. I do not deserve their pardon.”

The barbarian closed his eyes. “And I do not ask for yours.”

Aron’s expression grew distant. He seemed to hear words from years long past, words that sounded hard and true, that cut through the animal laughter filling the air. Only Kehr heard his whispered response.

“Names have power, Kehr Odwyll. This witch is wrong about mountain folk. Our forefathers were the first to pen the ancient letters you bear on your

chest.” He leaned forward. “I know your mark, barbarian. I knew it the moment you arrived, but I also saw your courage. And that is another sort of truth.”

The woodcutter pushed against the axe, and the blade bit into Kehr’s skin. The barbarian gasped.

“This axe is anointed with my own blood,” said Aron in a clear, loud voice. The matriarch laughed in surprise. “And with it I change your mark.”

The blade drew a red line through the middle of the scar.

“Now it names you brother.”

The matriarch hissed and dropped Kehr to the ground. She lunged forward and delivered a sharp kick to the woodsman. Aron flew backward over the bonfire in an arc of blood and torn flesh rent by the nail-studded hoof. He landed in a heap on the other side and struggled to rise.

“Little fool!” growled the goatmen’s queen. She was livid that her entertainment had been spoiled. “You think to craft godwords with your simple axe? You think such power can be wrought without terrible cost, without agony, without dark covenants?”

She reached down, lifted the barbarian by the manacles again, and began to pull his arms wide. The colored runes around her own thick arms rippled and danced while Kehr’s muscles stretched in taut relief.

“I will pull him apart like *bread*,” she howled, shaking the air, “and choke your people with the pieces!”

There was a crack as bone slid out of joint, and Kehr groaned.

Aron lifted his bloody head and reached to the tortured barbarian.

“You are forgiven, Kehr.”

The goatmen laughed. One of them stepped up and drove a spear through Aron’s back. The woodsman was still.

Suddenly, a piercing, braying cry tore the night sky. The khazra went silent. Scores of black slit eyes turned to the matriarch.

She stood trembling, her crooked teeth clenched, breath coming in labored, panting moans. She lowered her horns and dug her hooves into the cracked ground, but . . . she could not move her arms any farther apart. The matriarch hissed as Kehr began to slowly, inexorably bring his arms together, and hers as well. Straining against his efforts, she lifted the barbarian higher.

Kehr curled his hands around to grip the fingers locked around his wrists. Too late, she tried to release her hold on him, but she was caught.

“No!” she whined through bared teeth, spit frothing down her chin. “My . . . my strength defies yours! You . . . you cannot *do* this!”

Her muscles bulged obscenely as he drew her arms together. A shoulder popped, and the matriarch threw her head back with another screeching cry. The barbarian was bending her arms around himself at a vicious angle, and she could not wrench loose from the wringing embrace. The surrounding goatmen milled about nervously as their queen’s cries took on a plaintive, pathetic tone. Twisting to free herself, she lurched ahead . . . and the barbarian found his feet.

Now she was his.

Leaning down, Kehr used the creature’s momentum to pull her over his shoulders and into the bonfire with a crash. Panicked, the other khazra scattered as burning branches fell among them. The barbarian roared to the empty sky and flung his arms wide. The manacles snapped from his wrists and dropped to the ground, chains ringing down around him like broken bells.

Squealing, the matriarch staggered upright, a smoldering silhouette black against the flames. The barbarian charged and leapt into the fire, knocking the monster backward and grabbing ahold of her tangled horns. With a cruel twist, he tore them from her head and raised them high. He then swung the curling knot down as a club, beating at her scorched form to the sound of cracking bones.

The night trembled as her wails tempered the writhing smoke with agony. The Iron Path shook in harmony with Kehr Odwyll’s blows, and ancient magic resonated through the mountain’s spine, accepting the barbarian’s fury. Accepting his sacrifice.

It was hours before his rage had ebbed. The sun rose in docile silence, soaking the peaks in red.

Stepping from the pyre, Kehr dropped the gory mass to the ground and scanned the stained stretch of the Iron Path. No khazra remained or would ever return to this place. The refugees were not far off. Kehr saw they were huddled around Aron’s stricken figure, motionless with fear.

“Gather what food you can scavenge,” the barbarian rumbled. “Our destination is two days distant.”



## Vigil

The setting sun colored the valley of Westmarch in warm autumn hues. Kehr paused his sharpening of the simple axe, stood, and turned to watch the fading light, the evening breeze threading through his long graying hair with familiar care. He counted in slow breaths as the sun slipped behind the mountain.

The only sounds were those of birds returning to their nests. No footsteps. No words. The horizon kept its covenant as he kept his vigil.

More folk would be coming, the endless line of refugees that Aron had prophesied, treading the Iron Path as dark forces rallied to take the Kohl Mountains. The Bone clan had dwindled, but there were things worse than khazra in these peaks. The commoners needed their protector, and tales had spread from Westmarch to Ivgorod of the Iron Wayfarer, the guardian of the path. Kehr put his hand to his chest and set off down the road again. The refugees would need their brother.







- FEBREDO

# Unyielding

Matt Burns

*“When the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break.”*

Zhota could not silence Akyev’s parting words. They had dogged his every step for the past weeks. By day, the memory of his master’s voice was only a whisper, but when night came, it reached a fever pitch.

Tonight was the same . . . Tonight he knew he would be tested again.

The winds had picked up, howling through the Gorgorra like the last icy breath of a dying god. The cold gnawed through his green, white, and blue sashes, biting bone deep. In years past he had endured slashing mountain gales outside the Floating Sky Monastery without so much as flinching, but this wind was different. There was an urgency to it that filled him with disquiet, as if the forest gods were roiling in fear.

Zhota paced at the edge of the campsite, tapping his bo staff on the lichen-covered ground. Mossy pine and birch trees towered around the clearing where he had settled for the night, along with a supremely ancient oak. Its great gnarled boughs arched over the breadth of the camp almost protectively.

The two men near his fire were still asleep, wrapped tight in tattered woolen blankets. He had hoped for a night of solitude, but the refugees had spoiled that by finding him just after sunset. The desire to refuse them a place at his camp had been strong, but Zhota’s master had explicitly forbidden him from turning away travelers.

“Welcome them with open arms, but keep your heart guarded,” Akyev had ordered. “Observe them with care, for if they are tainted by a god of chaos, it will do all it can to evade your gaze.”

And so Zhota had obeyed, examining the strangers closely. It had not taken long for him to judge that they were free of corruption. The gaunt and weary-eyed men were a graying father and his twenty-year-old son, the sole survivors of an attack by a band of savage khazra. The filthy goatmen had taken the refugees’ village unawares and reduced it to a smoldering graveyard.

The men hailed from an area of the Gorgorra that held religious and cultural ties to Ivgorod, and they were fleeing north to the safety of the city.

Despite the horrors they had faced, the father and son were full of hope, and they believed that finding Zhota was a sign that the god of fate was looking kindly on them. He had felt almost cruel listening to them prattle about the life they would lead once within Ivgorod's walls, knowing in his heart that they would likely die before they reached the city.

As they prepared to sleep, the two had offered the last of their meager provisions in exchange for sharing Zhota's camp. He had politely feigned the urge to accept before he turned the gift away. In truth, he wanted nothing to do with the refugees. He had learned not to grow close to those he met in the Gorgorra for fear that they might become obstacles.

"Then we will give tribute twice over to the gods instead," the father had said, not unkindly. "They were gracious to have guided us to you, holy one. Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems."

*No, Zhota had wanted to reply. Not even me.*

The other man's words were true enough about the forest. Zhota had been raised on tales of the old-growth Gorgorra south of Ivgorod. Even the youngest trees had been ancient at the time of the monk order's founding. Here, he had always been taught, the balance among the thousand and one gods of order and chaos was immutable. He wondered what the elder monks would say if they could witness the shadowy crucible the forest had become.

Zhota continued his rounds of the campsite, repeating a mantra that opened his mind to the nearby woods, where his eyes could not see. He sensed something stirring out there in the darkness, a presence he had discovered earlier in the night. Slowly, almost methodically, it had grown stronger with each passing hour as if it was moving closer to the camp. Zhota's skin prickled at the sensation of being watched from every direction by a hundred eyes, the observers' true forms hidden from him. Even worse, none of the forest gods of order had answered his prayers to reveal the presence's source. The deities were indifferent . . . untrustworthy.

The gods had been this way for weeks, ever since the heavenly fire had burned over Ivgorod and landed somewhere south of the kingdom. In its wake, the chaotic gods and their demonspawn had begun prowling the forest while brigands pillaged the Gorgorra's isolated hamlets with impunity. There were dozens of different names and explanations for the comet, but what all of them shared in common were tidings of ill times ahead. Nowhere was the shadow as pervasive as it was in the leagues of dense mountain woodlands that

surrounded him. Discovering what the phenomenon truly meant was not Zhota's responsibility. Another member of his order, a peerless monk whom he had always held in high regard, had been sent out to learn more concerning the heavenly fire.

As the night deepened, Zhota grew restless. It seemed as if whatever unholy force was lurking in the woods was toying with him. His hand traced along the hundreds of glyphs and proverbs that he had carved into his staff. They snaked around the weapon from end to end in intricate patterns, every one a reminder of his training lessons. Zhota repeated the inscriptions, hoping for some kind of clarity or resolve. Instead, they dredged up memories of his failures under Akyev's tutelage.

He was reciting the lessons under his breath when the winds died to a whisper.

In the distance, a sharp pop akin to dry timber crackling in a fire echoed through the Gorgorra, followed by another and another. The strange noises were few and faint initially, but they quickly increased in frequency and volume, issuing from all directions around the camp. Zhota strained his eyes and peered into the darkness as the sounds rose to a deafening tumult of rattling boughs and splintering wood. He saw rows of trees just beyond the clearing shake and then spontaneously burst into kindling in successive waves that advanced closer to him and the refugees with each explosion.

The movement stopped at the edge of the camp. A dead stillness settled on the forest.

The old man and his son clambered to their feet, groggy from sleep.

"What is it?" the father mumbled.

Zhota held his hand up in a gesture of silence. He crept toward the darkness, a black abyss devoid of movement or form but heavy with the presence of what he now recognized as minions of the gods of chaos. Although he could not see them, they were so close that he believed he could reach out and touch them. They were everywhere around him, in the soil, the air, the trees.

*In the trees.*

The ground heaved beneath Zhota's feet as realization hit him. A mass of tree roots exploded upward in a shower of damp soil, flinging him through the air. He rolled with the fall, coming to his knees at the other side of the camp.

The trees around him swayed and extended their boughs, creaking and

groaning like giants awakening after eons of slumber. Motion flickered in the dim firelight all across the camp as numerous roots slithered up from the dirt and began blindly lashing out toward Zhota and the refugees.

“Stay near the fire!” Zhota barked at the other men.

The father and son scrambled to fish out logs from the flames, waving their makeshift torches at the exposed roots that had reached the camp’s center. Zhota charged toward a nearby pine, swiping at the roots that lunged at his feet. He struck the tree with his staff in a flurry of blows and then slammed his open palm against the trunk. Cracks rippled out from around his hand, spiraling up the pine. He leapt backward as the trunk erupted in a deluge of tinder and the tree’s upper half toppled into an adjacent birch.

Yet with the pine’s destruction, Zhota did not perceive that the demon within it had died. Rather, it seemed that the unholy presence had merely diminished in power. He opened his mind to the trees encircling the camp. They were all tainted, but they were only puppets being controlled by a single entity.

His eyes settled on the ancient oak, which had remained still and lifeless. Within its weathered trunk, he could suddenly feel the demon spreading its influence into the surrounding forest.

In response to Zhota’s discovery, the oak’s trunk wrenched open to form what resembled a gaping maw frothed with moss. It wailed a shrill cry that pierced the night and made Zhota’s knees go weak. The refugees dropped to the ground, clutching their ears and screaming in agony.

The other trees stilled as the demon coalesced its power, drawing it all back into the oak. The boughs swung down across the camp toward Zhota like dozens of jagged-edged lances. He dove to his side and swept his bo in a wide arc, sending an invisible blade of pure air ripping through the gnarled branches.

The oak shrieked in fury and renewed its attack with what was left of its broken limbs. Zhota somersaulted over the branches as they whipped through the air, landing at the base of the oak. With one vicious thrust, he plunged his bo into the tree’s jaws, focusing his mind on a single point at the end of the weapon.

The oak convulsed, its trunk pulsating as a torrent of divine fire flared out from its maw. The flames burned through the tree’s core, and it withered into a blackened, smoking husk.

“Holy one!” the father yelled behind him.

Zhota turned and saw that one of the oak’s limbs had pierced the son’s shoulder, pinning him to the ground. The young man was unconscious but alive.

“A flesh wound. He will live with your help, holy one,” the father said as he knelt next to his son.

Yes, Zhota wanted to say. Like all monks, he had been trained well in the arts of healing. He inspected the skin around the severed oak limb. The blood was a healthy crimson with no sign of corruption . . . yet.

The father stared up at Zhota, eyes full of hope and expectation. “Surely you can heal him?”

Zhota forced himself to speak the empty words that he had been ordered to recite. “He is tainted now. The corruption will evade my holy powers until I am gone. Only then will it emerge and overtake your son’s mind and body. We must give him to the gods so that he may be at peace.”

“No!” the old man cried in shock. “He will fight it. He is strong. Leave him to me. I swear to the thousand and one that if he shows corruption, I will kill him with my own hands. He is the last of my blood.”

The father grasped feebly at Zhota’s feet, pleading out of sheer desperation. None of this seemed right to the monk. He should be giving others hope, not stripping it away from them. For a moment, he considered leaving. But as soon as the thought had arisen, memories of Akyev came unbidden to him.

Zhota could almost see his master standing before him in the campsite now, looking at his former pupil with shame and disgust. The last time he had met Akyev had been weeks ago, after Zhota had passed the rites of monkhood and been tattooed with the circles of order and chaos on his forehead. It was a day after the heavenly fire had appeared over Ivgorod that his master had called him out to an open-aired terrace of the monastery, the mountain winds whipping at the elder monk’s earth-toned sashes of brown, black, and gray. The Unyielding, Akyev was sometimes called. His strength and resolve were everything Zhota strove to emulate but feared he would never achieve.

“Those who are touched by the spawn of the gods of chaos must be purified. Do not ask questions. Do not attempt to mend their wounds. We must make certain the taint is staunched quickly,” Akyev had said, relaying the instructions passed down to him by the nine Patriarchs—the heads of the Sahptev religion and the supreme rulers of Ivgorod. As the militant arm of the

faith, monks were charged with carrying out the decrees issued by the kingdom's divine leaders.

"The Patriarchs ask a hard task of you, one reserved only for the most devout of our order," the Unyielding had continued. He stared at Zhota for a moment, furrowing his brow. "You have attained the rank of monk, but there are times when I wonder if you are truly ready. There are times when I think you are still that fool boy who first came to the monastery. More beast than man, really . . . a wild thing with eyes clouded by emotion and intuition and all those other fleeting feelings that change on a whim just as swiftly as the winds. Are you that boy, or are you a monk?"

"That boy is dead," Zhota had answered.

"Then prove it. And remember that when the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break."

The next day, Akyev had set out from the monastery on his own mission. Zhota had departed not long afterward, but his master's words had stayed with him, a constant reminder of his past failures.

Akyev's voice was louder than ever now, the sound grating in Zhota's ears like the keening of steel swords. Anger filled him at his previous thoughts of abandoning duty. It was enough to push him forward.

*Duty is everything, he told himself. The word of the Patriarchs is the word of the gods. Who am I to question their methods? I am their instrument.*

Ivgorod's hallowed leaders were the reincarnations of the nine original humans who had been chosen by the gods to rule the kingdom. Four were pledged to order, four to chaos, and one remained neutral. They had always worked to uphold balance. Sometimes this meant asking the monks to perform difficult acts, but such was the nature of the world. It was all part of maintaining equality between order and chaos so that neither side reigned over the other.

"Step aside," Zhota ordered, but the old man did not move.

"My boy *never* dishonored the Patriarchs! This is how they reward him?" The refugee drew back and pulled a dull knife from his belongings near the fire. He lunged at the monk in a wild swing.

Zhota caught the old man's wrist, twisting it until he dropped the knife. The father yelped in pain and crumpled to his knees. "He is my only son," he sobbed.

By then, all the fight had gone out of the man. He slunk down and groveled

in the dirt.

Zhota slowly moved toward the son, reciting one of the monk order's ancient oaths in his head. *I walk among the gods of order and the gods of chaos. I channel both, becoming neither. I am the warrior who straddles the divide. So long as I act to uphold the balance, I am without sin.*

*Without sin.* He mouthed the words in silence as he placed his palm on the young man's chest. Zhota closed his eyes and then whispered a mantra to fill the son with holy energies. It was a form of mercy killing that the monk had learned from Akyev, used to grant a peaceful and painless death to those who had been mortally wounded and were beyond the order's healing powers.

He felt the young man's heart beat slower and slower, until at last it stopped. Afterward, Zhota built a wooden pyre and purified the corpse in flames.

The light of dawn was creeping through the forest by the time the bones were charred black. Zhota set out alone, knowing that he should raise his head high in triumph at having fulfilled the Patriarchs' will. Instead, all he could think about was the broken old man behind him, the last vestiges of hope fading from him as he knelt over his son's remains and prayed to gods who no longer listened.

• • •

Zhota found the slaughtered caravan three days later.

There were eight corpses in all, strewn about a small clearing blanketed with a layer of fallen pine needles. He pulled the sash wrapped across his chest up over his nose to ward off the stench, and he opened his mind to the surrounding area, searching for the presence of demons. He discovered none.

More than two dozen sacks of provisions lay scattered next to a stocky packbeast, cleaved in half at its immense shoulders. There were too many supplies for the one animal to bear, even as strong and tenacious as packbeasts were. Near the road, Zhota came across three sets of hoof tracks, each leading in a divergent direction.

The human corpses were ripe, the caravan no more than a day dead. Most of the victims wore drab gray robes common among those who dwelled in the Gorgorra. Yet finely crafted swords and axes sat beside many of the bodies, belying their simplistic garb.

He knelt by one of the dead, a well-built man with the calloused and scarred



hands of a warrior. Maggots squirmed around a number of wounds on his arms and chest. It appeared that nearly all of the travelers had been tortured before being killed.

One body in particular truly piqued Zhota's interest. The woman had been stripped naked and thrown upon the now-blackened fire pit at the center of the camp, her legs charred to a crisp. Unlike the other victims, she was missing her head. Zhota scoured the clearing again but did not find it.

The massacre had been calculated. There was a story here, he knew, but the Patriarchs had not sent him into the Gorgorra to puzzle out mysteries. He needed only to purify the corpses before he departed.

Zhota spied something half buried in the ashes of the fire pit and pulled it free, an ornately inscribed wooden flute adorned with brass studs. It was a child's toy. He remembered that he had brought one of the instruments with him to the monastery when he had begun training. Music had always been honored in the monk order and Ivgorod as a whole, but Akyev did not share his comrades' love of the arts. Immediately after he had found the flute among Zhota's belongings, he had snapped it in half and cast it off a cliff at the edge of the Floating Sky Monastery.

Zhota brushed soot from the instrument and put it to his lips. When he blew, the notes were a broken disharmony. They were as empty and meaningless as his life had been before he joined the monk order. He prepared to toss the toy back into the pit but ultimately stayed his hand. Something about holding the flute was oddly emboldening, and he felt almost tranquil. He tucked it into his sash, convincing himself that it would be a reminder of the weak, ignorant boy he had once been.

The dense canopy at the edge of the clearing suddenly rustled with movement.

Zhota bolted up, turning toward the sound. "Show yourself?"

Dead leaves cascaded to the ground just beyond the clearing. Zhota was creeping into the forest gloom when a small figure dropped from a massive birch and plunged deeper into the woods.

Zhota gave chase. The runner had donned the same drab robes as the dead travelers. It was a child, from the looks of it, and a clumsy one at that. The figure stumbled over roots and shouldered into tree trunks as it fled.

Finally, he tackled it to the forest floor. The child squirmed beneath his grasp and started to sob. When Zhota drew back the figure's hood, he saw an

abomination that sent an icy chill through his spine.

It was a boy no older than ten. Long, almost translucent hair flowed out across the cold soil, framing a thin, mousy face. His skin was the color of sun-bleached bone. And his eyes . . .

His eyes were stark white, and they wept tears of blood.

• • •

The blind child was silent for days after Zhota had purified the slain travelers and resumed his journey, ignoring the monk's questions about what had happened to the caravan. He began thinking that the boy was also mute, until one night, the child muttered, "Mother," in his sleep.

The youth had tried to flee on several occasions, forcing Zhota to remove one of his sashes and bind the boy's hands with it, using the clothing as a leash of sorts. The decision to bring him along in the first place had not come easy. The very sight of him filled Zhota with foreboding. For a time the monk had toyed with the idea that he was a demon in the guise of a child, but the thought had passed quickly. *Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems.*

The boy was freakish, that was true, but Zhota had not sensed anything demonic within him. He seemed mindful of his surroundings in a way that only one who had never relied on his eyes could be. Even so, the child constantly tripped over mossy rocks or exposed roots, slowing Zhota's pace to a snail's crawl.

Of greater concern was that the youth had the stamina of a dying dog. He couldn't travel more than half a mile without stopping to catch his breath. Whenever the calls of birds or other beasts echoed in the nearby forests, he would wander off toward the sound, enraptured with childish curiosity. Zhota had a mind to leave the boy behind, but the monk hoped to learn more about what had assailed the caravan.

The child's stubborn silence, however, persisted. If the little one wanted to play games, Zhota decided, the monk would play as well.

"Faster, demon child." Zhota tugged on the boy's leash.

"Mind your step here, demon child," he said as he led the youth over a bed of rocks.

He goaded the boy for the rest of the day, watching as the child's skin flushed red with rage. Finally, the youth bristled, yanking against Zhota's grip.

"I'm not a demon!"

"So you do speak."

The child cringed in defeat and lowered his head.

"Give me your name, boy. I am here to help you."

"Liar. You tricked me. You played the wrong song."

"Tricked you? Perhaps I should have left you back there. How long do you think one blind boy would last in the Gorgorra—" Zhota was saying when he remembered the flute tucked into his sash.

He withdrew the instrument and held it out to the child. "I take it this is yours, then."

The youth groped the air until he found the flute, then he hugged it to his chest. Blood tears poured down from his eyes, trailing thin red veins that made it look as if someone had slashed his face with a fine blade.

"Mother . . ." the child whispered. "She promised she would call me back with our song. When I heard the music, it was wrong . . . all wrong . . . I thought she had forgotten." He turned his sightless eyes to Zhota as if the boy could truly see him, wrinkling his face in anger. "What did you do with her?"

"If your mother was at the camp, she is with the gods now," Zhota said, recalling the headless woman in the fire pit. He saw no point in tempering the truth with vagaries or false hope. "She and the others met their fate long before I ran across them."

"The gods told me as much," the boy said, "but I didn't want to believe them."

"Whatever ill force that slew them is gone. It will trouble you no more."

"No," the youth shot back. "The demon that attacked us is still out there. The others at the camp, they hid me in the tree and then set the beasts loose to fool it, but when it finds I'm not with them, it will come looking for me again. Mother said it will never stop chasing us until we are both dead."

"The demons here kill indiscriminately. They do not chase travelers for days on end. Now, tell me your name and where you came from. Do you have relatives in the Gorgorra?"

"You don't believe me," the child said. He ignored the rest of Zhota's questions.

That night, after Zhota made camp, the boy curled up to sleep by the warmth of the fire, the flute tucked between his arms. The youngster's obstinacy was infuriating, but the monk had to wonder why the gods had

crossed their paths if not for him to safeguard the child. He was helpless . . . alone . . . afraid . . .

“The commoners you meet will try to lead you away from the path of duty with their tears and their sorrows. You must be wiser than they are. You must not stray,” Akyev had warned him.

There was wisdom in Akyev’s words, Zhota had to admit. He had been dispatched to restore balance in the Gorgorra, not to shepherd orphans. But he couldn’t bring himself to abandon the boy.

Zhota traced the lessons engraved on his bo with his fingers. His hand stopped at a deep gouge near the center of the staff. The notch was an ugly thing that marred the otherwise beautiful inscriptions he had carved, but Akyev had forbidden Zhota to repair it, for otherwise he would forget its meaning.

“Your weapon is only as strong as your spirit,” Akyev had said to him the day his staff was cut. The monks strove to hone their bodies and minds into instruments of divine justice. Swords, staves, and other tools of battle were, in truth, unnecessary. Even so, the order valued training with all manner of armaments to strengthen its martial prowess. It was not uncommon for a monk to wield one type of weapon and use it as an extension of his perfectly balanced spirit to mentally focus his attacks. Akyev was an adherent of such a method, and he had spent a great deal of time imparting his philosophies about weaponry to Zhota over the years.

“The ignorant will see your bo as mere wood, something easily broken,” Akyev had continued. “Yet it will only splinter when you hesitate, and so long as you walk the path of duty, there is no reason for that to happen.”

Zhota and his master had gathered at one of the monastery’s walled training grounds to spar with real weapons. The days of practicing with blunt-edged swords and hollowed-out staves were over.

The younger monk had arrived full of confidence, but it had all melted away when Akyev drew his scimitar. The sword was unadorned, but Zhota had known that it was anything but ordinary. The Unyielding had forged it with his own hands, folding the steel on itself again and again for months. Every morning, he had prayed to his patron deity—Zaim, the god of the mountains—to infuse the blade with indomitable strength. It could part solid stone and plate armor as if they were water.

“The weapon is an ornament,” Akyev had said upon seeing the fear in

Zhota's face. "The Patriarchs deem that my blade is no greater than your staff. Do you think to question their divine wisdom?"

"No," Zhota had answered, trying to sound as if he truly believed the word.

After that, the sparring had begun. When Akyev's first strike had come crashing down, doubt and uncertainty had gripped Zhota. It wasn't the sword he saw before him but the man wielding it—the man who was always his better, who never flinched from any task given to him, no matter how arduous.

The scimitar had cleaved Zhota's bo, driving him to his knees. His master had yanked the blade free and roared in fury. "Fool! I could have killed you. You allowed your fears to guide you."

Akyev had eyed the green, blue, and white sashes around Zhota's body in disgust. "You have too much of the rivers in you . . . Sometimes still and calm, sometimes turbulent."

The tones of Zhota's clothing were emblematic of Ymil, the god of the rivers. The deity was associated with emotion, intuition, and the life-giving properties of water. Yet there were some monks, Akyev most of all, who argued that Ymil was capricious and indecisive. As a result of Zhota's choosing this god as his patron, the Patriarchs had paired him with Akyev. The hope had been that the elder monk's rigid demeanor would temper the younger's hesitant nature, and vice versa.

"Our tasks are simple; our orders are clear. Why do you complicate them with uncertainty?" Akyev had said as he inspected the cut in Zhota's staff. "This is the cost of disobedience. This is what happens when you stray from duty. And when the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break."

The moon was high by the time Zhota stopped reliving the memory of that day in his mind, his thumb raw from tracing the jagged cleft in his bo. The boy was still sleeping. The sight of him made Zhota livid. He wished he had never stumbled across the child in the first place.

*He does not matter*, Zhota told himself. The orphan's past and all of the mysteries of the slaughtered camp were distractions. As the night wore on, the monk made his choice. There were villages south from his current location. If they had not been scoured, he would find someone there to look after the child.

If they had been, and if there was no safe haven to be found in three days' time, he would give the boy the only option left: peace.

Zhota stood in a shaft of light that cascaded through the forest canopy, embracing the cleansing dawn sun. He rose to the tips of his toes, his arms raised high and his head held down so that his chin touched his chest. He maintained the pose, eyes closed, for more than ten minutes, silently chanting mantras to clear his mind.

His morning meditations were the closest thing to rest that he allowed himself. He had scarcely slept in the past few weeks, traveling by day and keeping watch at night.

Five days had elapsed, and the child was still alive. As the monk had feared, the villages he had visited had been empty. With each passing day, Zhota had made some excuse as to why he had not given the boy to the gods yet. Today, he tried to justify his hesitation by convincing himself that another village lay not far ahead.

“Mishka . . . that is my name,” the child said, interrupting Zhota’s peaceful state.

“Zhota,” he grunted in reply, and he refocused on his mantras.

After a moment, he heard an alien sound—something oddly sweet that did not belong in the Gorgorra. When he opened his eyes, he saw Mishka playing a few tremulous notes on the flute.

The boy brought the instrument down. “Do you know ‘The Trickster of the Moss Barrows’?”

“No,” Zhota said in irritation, although in truth he knew it. It was children’s music, full of outlandish heroics—exactly the type of song that he himself would have played in his youth.

“That was Mother’s favorite song, the one she would play when things were safe.” Mishka smiled bittersweetly. “I can teach it to you.”

“That is not nec—” Zhota began, but the boy started the music anyway.

Zhota sighed and broke out of his meditative pose.

*Let the youth have this if it will make him content. It will all end soon,* he told himself.

When he and Mishka set out for the day, Zhota hefted the boy onto his back. Two nights before, the child had stumbled over a fallen tree and nearly broken his arm. Since then the monk had taken to carrying Mishka from time to time to quicken their pace and keep the boy out of trouble.

As Zhota trudged through the dense mountain woods, the child continued his song. Zhota tried ignoring the tune, thinking that the boy would tire of it, but before long the sun was setting and Mishka was still blaring with the instrument.

It wasn't until that night, after Zhota had made a new camp, that the music really hit him. In a distant corner of his mind, he heard the sound of laughter and saw barefooted children racing through a village of thatch-roofed hovels without a care, innocent and ignorant of the precarious balance between order and chaos in the world. It took him a moment to realize that it was his own childhood.

*"When the ill wind blows, the tree that bends will break."* The words rang in his head.

"Enough!" Zhota yanked away Mishka's flute and tucked it into his sashes.

"I only wanted you to hear the song," the boy said, furrowing his brows.

"Once would have sufficed, not a thousand times," Zhota growled before reining in his irritation. When he saw Mishka lower his head in guilt, the monk put in, "It is dark, and you draw unwanted attention."

He had meant the words as an excuse, but not half an hour later they proved to be true.

Two sharp whistles pierced the night. Zhota opened his mind to the woods in search of movement, but the gods were as reluctant as ever to guide him. Before long, two men emerged from the forest, clad in a motley array of battle-worn armor.

Zhota knew from the first glance what they were. *Brigands . . . mercenaries . . . godless men.*

They hesitated at the edge of the camp and exchanged looks. One of them, a brute with thick sinewy arms and a glistening scar that stretched from his left ear to his chin, glared at Zhota and then turned to leave. The other stopped him. He had a clean-shaven, handsome face framed by shoulder-length jet-black hair. His emerald eyes glimmered hungrily in the firelight, staring intently at Mishka.

"The night is dark, holy one," the handsome man said, finally breaking his gaze.

"Then let the light of my fire ease you," Zhota replied, finishing the ancient greeting. Even with these men, he couldn't find it in himself to ignore Akhev's command to observe travelers.

“What brings you this deep into the woods?” Zhota asked as the two brigands settled near the fire. He kept his breath measured and his face calm, but behind his still mask he judged both of the newcomers’ movements, finding their weaknesses. The travelers were armed: the brute with a monstrous battle axe, and his companion with a bastard sword slung on his back.

“Same as you.” The handsome man warmed his hands by the fire. “The monks are spread thin, it seems, and your order has called on those with steel to lend aid.”

*Lies*, Zhota wanted to spit back, but he held his tongue. The thought of the Patriarchs using brigands to uphold their divine will was sacrilege. Godless men only revered one thing in life: gold.

“When did the Patriarchs issue such a decree?”

“Not them directly. It was one of your brothers patrolling these parts. He told of a demon loose in the woods. A devious little whelp that wears the face of a blind child, with skin and hair as white as snow.” He was smiling at Mishka as he spoke. “Looks like you’ve already caught the wretch yourself.”

Mishka stirred. “I’m not a demon!”

“Then why are you bound?” The scarred man chuckled.

“The one chasing me is the demon. It killed Mother and the rest of them.” Blood began pooling under Mishka’s eyes.

“Blood tears . . .” The handsome man cringed. “If you’re not a demon, then you’re cursed.”

“I can’t control it. It’s been that way since I was born. Mother said only fools think it’s a curse.” Mishka outstretched his bound hands and groped for Zhota. “You believe me, don’t you?”

“Quiet,” Zhota replied as fear and uncertainty ripped through him.

*Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems.*

It was possible, he had to admit, that some foolish member of his order had enlisted the help of mercenaries. And if this monk considered the boy to be a demon . . . Had Zhota been deceived all this time?

*No.* He had watched him for days. Mishka was just a child, albeit one cursed by the gods. Surely tales had spread about a hideous boy traveling the forests, and the other monk had taken them as truth.

“Where is this monk? I must speak with him about the child.”

“About the demon, you mean?” the handsome man said. “West of here, last



we saw. He finds us, not the other way around.”

“Give us the creature,” the scarred man put in. “The monk promised us the thing’s weight in gold if we delivered it. We need that coin. We’ve been living off roots and carrion for days.”

Zhota ignored him. “West, you said. I will seek out this other monk.”

“We’ll join you,” the brute stated. “The monk owes us something for our part.”

“Your work is done.” Zhota rose and pulled Mishka up.

“Do you have the coin to pay us, then?” the handsome man asked.

“Your reward is the gratitude of the Patriarchs.”

The scarred man spat near Zhota’s feet.

His comrade sighed. “See, that’s where we run into a bit of a problem. Duty and honor are all fine and good for you and your bald brothers, but not so much for the likes of us.”

Zhota took a few measured breaths to calm his anger. He had suffered the presence of these men for too long. “That is why your kind lives in filth and ignominy.”

The scarred man bristled, but his companion only laughed, making a hoarse sound rife with contempt and condescension. He was still chuckling when he drew the bastard sword from his back.

“Stubborn, aren’t you?” he said. “Your beard is much shorter than the other monk we met. Must not have been long ago that you were suckling from the Patriarchs’ holy teats at your mountain hovel.”

Zhota remained motionless, every muscle in his body coiled. “Long enough ago for me to deal with two godless men.”

“Two? Perhaps. But three?” The handsome man whistled.

From the darkness behind Zhota came the shriek of steel-tipped wood soaring through the air. He whirled and swung his bo in a swift arc, snapping the arrow in half scarcely a foot from his chest.

When he turned back to see the camp, the handsome man was charging around the fire at Mishka. Zhota thrust his staff toward the flames. A wave of air surged off of his bo and crashed into the fire pit, hurling smoldering logs at the brigand. Most of the fiery debris ricocheted off his armor, but one ember sliced across his face and sank into his right eye. The man cried in agony as the blaze spread, setting his hair alight.

The brute leapt over the fire pit and lumbered toward Zhota, his battle axe

raised overhead. Zhota held his ground as the brigand brought the immense weapon downward. At the last moment, the monk sidestepped the graceless attack, and his foe's axe cleaved into the forest floor. With his staff, Zhota cracked the man's forearms, and they shattered like wine-filled pottery in a gush of blood and splintered bone.

The barely discernible twang of a bowstring sounded behind Zhota. He dove to his side as the arrow sang past his shoulder and pierced the scarred man's chest. A curse echoed from the unseen assailant, followed by the patter of footfalls retreating deeper into the forest, away from the camp.

Zhota surveyed his surroundings. The handsome man was dead now as well, the skin on his neck and face a mass of blood and blisters. Mishka, however, was gone.

"Mishka?" he called. A sliver of fear crept through him.

"Here," the child said as he crawled out from beneath an overturned tree. "They lied. The demon sent—"

"Silence!" Zhota roared.

Thoughts were racing through his head. He could hear Akhev's voice berating him. *It has all been a ruse to put you off your guard. Were you so foolish that you did not see it?*

"Why don't you believe me?" Mishka asked. He reached out and clutched Zhota's hand.

There was something ironic about the child standing in front of him, so innocent, when days ago Zhota had decided to kill him. It was then that the monk became aware of how much Mishka reminded him of himself as a child, full of trust and hope and all those other things that the Unyielding had despised. They were the mires on the path of duty—the childish parts of himself that Zhota thought he had killed in training.

But they had never truly died. They revealed to him a truth that was difficult to believe: that Mishka *was* only a boy, alone and afraid and blind, searching for a hand to guide him through the shadows of the Gorgorra. There was a reason that the god of fate had led them to meet.

"The truth," Zhota said. "What is this demon? Why is it chasing you?"

The boy chewed his bottom lip, hesitant, but eventually spoke. "Father sent it."

"And what would make a man do that?"

"My father . . . he's not *just* a man," Mishka said timidly.

Then he recounted the story of his past.

• • •

A thick fog descended on the Gorgorra, diffusing the midday sun and painting the forest in tones of decay. Zhota had carried Mishka on his back in circles for hours, going west of their camp, hoping in vain to find the monk spoken of by the godless men. Not for the first time Zhota considered himself a fool for taking their words at face value.

Still, he trudged on. If one of his order was truly out there, he had to find him and tell him the truth regarding Mishka. The boy had talked of his past well into the night, a story so blasphemous that even listening to it had made Zhota feel unclean. The more that he thought about it now, the more implausible it seemed. *And how do you propose to convince a monk of its validity?*

He quieted his doubts and continued moving. It was another hour before the fog rose and Zhota caught the scent of incense as he entered a small clearing. It was faint at first, an odor in stark contrast to the forest's damp and earthy aromas. It took him a moment to discern hints of bloodrose and jadedwood, but when he did, he froze.

He recognized that scent.

"What is it?" Mishka whispered.

Zhota didn't reply. He couldn't. His body had turned as rigid as stone. He knew that smell as well as he knew his own name. It was from Akyev's incense, and it had clung to the older monk every day of Zhota's training.

He felt suddenly small and weak . . . just like the boy he had once been before Akyev had killed that part of him, or at least tried to . . .

The air had been crisp and clear the morning that Zhota first met Akyev. The Unyielding had called him out to one of the monastery's terraces at sunrise. The younger monk had heard many tales of his master's renowned strength, and he had been counting the hours until he could finally meet the Unyielding and begin his training.

But Zhota's youthful bliss would die that day. He would learn that the Unyielding was somewhat of an oddity in the order, a man who was willing to do anything if it meant fulfilling commands. His might and resolve were matched only by his fanaticism and uncompromising nature.

“Jump,” Akyev had said, pointing over the terrace’s edge, which ended at the top of a sheer seven-hundred-foot cliff face.

It took a moment for Zhota to realize that Akyev was serious. That was when the fear hit him. He knew that he would die if he obeyed the command, and yet a small part of him believed he would be safe. The feeling did not originate from his desire to blindly follow orders; it came from deep within himself. Ultimately, however, Zhota attributed the notion to pure madness.

When his master grabbed him by the neck and dragged him to the edge, Zhota screamed for mercy. The Unyielding answered his pleas by throwing him into the abyss. He closed his eyes, awaiting his death, until he slammed into a rock ledge a few feet down from the monastery—a ledge that hadn’t been there previously.

That was before he learned of the monastery’s secrets: the walls that were not walls, the stairs that were not stairs, and the many other illusions meant to keep initiates alert at all times.

After Zhota’s fall, Akyev had hauled him back up from the ledge. The young monk was shivering uncontrollably. “You tremble like a leaf in the wind,” his master had chided. “You are a slave to fear. That is why you will never be a monk. You are nothing but a scared boy who has no place in this order.”

When Zhota had mustered the courage to look Akyev in the eye, the Unyielding had then asked, “You must choose. Are you that boy, or are you a monk?”

“I am not that boy,” he had answered, wiping away his tears.

“So be it. Should he ever show his face again, there will not be a ledge to save him from the fall.”

Zhota snapped out of the memory and shook his head. He had ignored his intuitions that day. It would not be for the last time. Over the years, the Unyielding had worked feverishly to suppress his pupil’s insistence on trusting in himself when presented with difficult situations. Whether or not Zhota’s insights were correct didn’t matter to Akyev. He believed such reliance on the self would compromise one’s ability to obey the Patriarchs’ commands and prosecute their divine will.

“What is it?” Mishka asked as he climbed down from Zhota’s back.

“Nothing.” A cold uneasiness was coiling in his stomach. If it were any other monk, perhaps Zhota could convince him of Mishka’s innocence. But not Akyev. Not the Unyielding.

Zhota considered departing this area of the forest, but his master found him and Mishka before he could act on the shameful thought. Akyev had emerged from behind a colossal pine, leading a packbeast laden with leather satchels of various sizes. The elder monk looked just as he always had—calm and composed, not a trace of gray in his black beard. The circles of order and chaos on his forehead were still vivid, as if they had been tattooed there yesterday rather than years ago.

“Zhota,” Akyev said. He glanced briefly at Mishka, but there was no sign of surprise on his face.

“Master.” Zhota placed his palms together and bowed low.

The elder monk strode forward in slow, measured steps until he stood in front of his former pupil. Zhota was a head taller than his master, but he felt as if he were standing before a giant nonetheless.

“I had feared you were not ready, but it appears you have proven me wrong.” Akyev turned his gaze to Mishka. “You have succeeded where even I had failed. The gods are mysterious indeed.”

Pride welled up in Zhota. Akyev had never praised his efforts previously. His master had always found fault in everything he did. During his time at the monastery, Zhota had witnessed other monks fostering positive relationships with their acolytes. When mistakes were made, pupils were not necessarily punished; they were shown the right way. That had not been so with Akyev. Zhota fought against the intoxicating nature of his master’s rare affirmation, reminding himself of the child’s plight.

“You are searching for a demon, but the boy—” Zhota started, but his master interrupted him.

—is not a boy. Nothing in the Gorgorra is as it seems. Look at what has become of this sacred place. Balance has been lost. This, Zhota, this is the moment that we have trained for our entire lives.”

Akyev lowered his voice to a whisper and pointed at Mishka. “The gods of order tremble with unease. This abomination wearing the skin of a child is just one more indication of the dire state of things.”

The boy had been oddly silent throughout the exchange. Zhota saw now that he was frozen with terror. Blood flowed down from his eyes, and his body shook uncontrollably.

*“It’s the demon!”* Mishka suddenly screamed. “The demon!”

“Do you see?” Akyev calmly said. “The wretched creature will spread any lie

to hide its true form.”

*Abomination.* The absurdity of Mishka’s tale weighed heavy on Zhota. He knew he had to act quickly before he gave in to his doubts, and so he purged the reservations from his mind and recounted the child’s story . . .

The night prior, Mishka had confided that he was the son of a Patriarch and his concubine. Due to the boy’s deformities, his father had considered killing him, but his mother had convinced the Patriarch to confine him to a corner of Ivgorod’s palace instead. There Mishka had lived for years in isolation until the heavenly fire scorched the sky. As tales of dark and unholy forces rising in the Gorgorra and other regions had reached Ivgorod, fear and paranoia had taken hold in the kingdom. Tensions had flared among the terrified common folk as they looked to the Patriarchs for answers . . . for salvation.

The Patriarchs were the voice of the gods themselves. They were paragons of righteousness. For one to sire a child like Mishka would be seen, at best, as an ill omen. But in these bleak and ominous times, such a progeny would cast doubt on the Patriarch’s own purity. For this reason, Zhota surmised, the holy leader had finally ordered that his son be put to death. Only through the work of his mother and a few loyal servants had Mishka been spared his fate and whisked away from Ivgorod, deep into the heart of the Gorgorra.

When Zhota finished speaking, Akyev regarded him for a long moment, never arguing or questioning the story. He merely said, “You have heard only the lies that the demon has fed you.”

“It is hard to fathom, I know, but I believe he is innocent.”

“You *believe*? Would you swear on your honor as a member of our order that it is true?”

“Yes,” Zhota answered, but his voice lacked conviction.

Akyev lowered his head and took a deep breath. “Then I was wrong . . .”

“It is as you said: nothing in the Gorgorra is—”

Akyev cut the words short with a roundhouse kick to Zhota’s sternum that crushed the air from his lungs.

The world went black, and bells clanged in his head. Above the din he could hear Mishka screaming. When Zhota’s vision returned, he saw Akyev looming over him, grasping the child by the hair.

“I was wrong about you,” Akyev spat. “How could you have strayed so far? It was one of the Patriarchs who informed me of the demon and its deceptions! Who are you to question him?”

Zhota planted his staff in the ground and struggled to his feet as the Unyielding's words hit him. *One of the Patriarchs ordered him to do this. Did the other eight not have any part in the mission?*

"Kill the creature," the Unyielding commanded, "and you will be forgiven for your transgressions."

The desire to obey was oppressive. He had lived by his master's teachings for so long that defying them almost made him physically ill. Yet a voice deep inside of Zhota whispered for him to do just that; it was an intuition, a flare of insight, like those that Akyev had always told him to silence during his years of training. It went against everything he'd learned was right, but in its own unexplainable way, it shone with the light of truth.

"No . . . He's not . . ." Zhota managed to say through wheezing breaths.

His master sighed. "I held on to hope that you would be strong, that you would overcome the weaknesses within you. But you are still a boy. I have only myself to blame for your failures."

"The gods are uneasy, as you said." Zhota steeled himself for the blasphemy he was about to speak. "The Patriarch who dispatched you is no longer concerned with upholding the balance," he continued. "The demon you seek, if it exists, is out there even now."

Akyev drove his knee into Zhota's stomach, and he crumpled to the ground. He looked up in time to see his master's free hand flash forward. Pain lanced through Zhota's forehead. Something warm and wet trickled into his eyes and down his nose. When Akyev drew his hand back and flicked a bloody scrap aside, Zhota realized that it was the skin where the circles of order and chaos had been tattooed on his forehead.

"You have no right to wear those holy symbols! You are not a monk . . . No. Return to the monastery at once and await my arrival. Your sacrilege will be brought before the Patriarch."

The Unyielding walked away, pulling Mishka after him. Zhota rose, fighting back the shame. The failures and lessons inscribed on his staff seemed to burn his hand wherever he touched them.

Rage . . . rage at all those times Akyev had bested him, all those times Zhota had wanted to believe in himself only to have the Unyielding belittle him, surged through his veins like fire.

He charged at Akyev, closing the distance with him, and whipped the side of his master's neck with his bo. The blow caused Zhota's arms to shudder as if

he had hit solid granite. His staff buckled, and a long crack ripped up along the length of the weapon.

Akyev staggered slightly, enough for Mishka to wiggle free.

“Hide the way your mother told you!” Zhota bellowed. “Only come out when you hear her song!” Mishka stumbled away, deeper into the woods. He wouldn’t get far on his own, Zhota knew.

But Akyev took the bait. He drew his scimitar and pursued, the blade shining dully in the forest gloom. Zhota drove his staff toward the Unyielding’s chest. Akyev parried the assault with ease and then moved his sword in a low arc with blinding speed. Zhota planted his foot on the tree behind him and flipped over the elder monk and his attack.

The Unyielding’s blade sheared the tree trunk clean through. The towering pine began to topple down into the clearing, toward the packbeast. The animal snorted and lumbered forward just as the tree’s boughs raked across its back, stripping away the satchels. Zhota flinched when the pine crashed to the forest floor in a thunderous boom.

Akyev’s belongings scattered in all directions. The largest of the bags tore open, and something rolled out of it on a bed of salt and herbs. It was pallid and decayed, with wispy strands of black hair.

A woman’s head, the mouth stretched wide and frozen in a silent scream.

The puzzle pieces fell into place. The slaughtered caravan. The headless body. The demon.

Zhota looked at Akyev, not wanting to believe. His master was many things—perhaps the cruelest and most severe of the monks—but Zhota had never thought he could be a murderer.

He couldn’t imagine the Patriarchs would condone the butchery of the caravan under any circumstances. No, this was all wrong. It was evident that Mishka’s father was one of the Patriarchs pledged to chaos and that he was acting without the consent of the other rulers. Perhaps that was why he had chosen Akyev—a man who would obey without hesitation to any end asked of him.

Akyev did not give the head a second glance. His scimitar bit deep into Zhota’s left bicep in a perfectly placed strike that severed the muscles in his limb. His arm went slack, and he took a few haphazard steps away from the elder monk before recovering.

Zhota swept his staff one-handed toward Akyev’s head in a feint, and then



he kicked at the Unyielding's gut. Akyev caught his ankle and flung him into the fallen tree.

Before Zhota could roll to safety, his master leapt forward and drove his scimitar down. Zhota lashed his staff out with his right arm to deflect the blow, but he suddenly felt helpless against the legend he faced, his mind turbulent with doubt just as it had been during training. The sword splintered his bo, but the defensive measure was enough to divert the elder monk's attack. Akyev's scimitar sliced diagonally across Zhota's chest, leaving a shallow wound.

Zhota struggled to rise with his good arm, but he sank back to the ground in pain and defeat.

"You fought as I had expected, without grace or resolve," Akyev stated.

"You know the boy is not a demon," Zhota managed to say.

"I know what the Patriarch has told me. I do not question him."

"The caravan . . . You killed those people."

"I fulfilled my duty."

"Did it require you to hire godless men? To murder innocents?"

"The brigands were tools, just as I am an instrument of the divine ones. I would have sent them to the gods for judgment if they had delivered the demon to me. As for the others, they sheltered the creature. When I asked where it had fled, they cursed the Patriarchs. The travelers died like the dogs they were."

Akyev gestured to the severed head. "That belongs to the demoness. I took it as proof of her demise. She was the thrall of the demon-child, a whore whom the creature would send into villages to lure out new victims."

"A lie," Zhota said. "His father, the Patriarch, has turned to murder due to his fears. He believes the commoners will think him tainted, perhaps will even rise up against him, if they know he sired a deformed child. He has abandoned the system of balance to pursue his own ends."

"You will never understand what it means to follow duty," Akyev retorted. "You condemn my actions with a human heart when they are dictated by the gods. You are less than a heretic. You are a stain on my honor and that of our entire order. I will give you to the gods to be judged."

"You know he is only a boy, don't you? But you choose to ignore the truth," Zhota said as the Unyielding raised the scimitar high overhead. There was the briefest flash of uncertainty in his master's eyes.

Akyev swung his blade regardless. Time seemed to slow as the steel hurtled

down . . . down . . . down. With sudden clarity, Zhota realized that it was not he who had wavered; it was Akyev. The Unyielding, in his weakness, had bent before the rising chaos and closed his eyes to truth.

Zhota prayed to the silent gods around him for strength. If there was anything innocent left in the Gorgorra, he knew that it was Mishka. Zhota focused on this one thought, reminding himself that he was acting according to the principles of balance. He quieted the fear and pain, concentrating on the surface of his right palm and willing it to be strong as he shot it up to meet the blade.

The Unyielding's scimitar crashed into his hand. The sword's weight was like an entire mountain pressing down on him. Yet the weapon's edge did not pass through Zhota's skin. He would not bend like Akyev. He would not break.

"He is just a boy," Zhota grunted through his teeth as he clenched his fingers around the sword. "You can still do what is right!"

"*Silence!*" the elder monk bellowed. Sweat beading on his brow, he fought to rip his scimitar free of Zhota's grasp. When he found he could not, the Unyielding leaned forward, pushing the steel against Zhota's hand.

*I will not bend. I will not break.*

Zhota gave a primal roar and twisted his wrist. Akyev's weapon snapped like deadwood, and the elder monk toppled at the sudden release of tension. Zhota flipped the broken blade laterally in his hand and arced it up in a tight swing, slicing through his master's neck with a cut so clean that Akyev's head stayed on his shoulders until his body slammed into the ground.

. . .

Zhota couldn't recall later how long he lay on his back, staring up with a mind as clear as the cloudless sky above the forest canopy. Nor could he recall performing the tasks he did afterward: dressing his wounds and chanting healing mantras, struggling to build a pyre to purify Akyev's body as he slowly regained mobility in his left arm. The first thing he remembered was bringing the flute to his lips and blowing. He had been afraid that he wouldn't recollect the song's notes from when he had played them in his youth.

But the tune must have been right, because Mishka emerged into the clearing.

"Zhota?" he asked meekly.

“Here.”

Mishka followed the sound of his voice and stood at his side.

“The demon . . .”

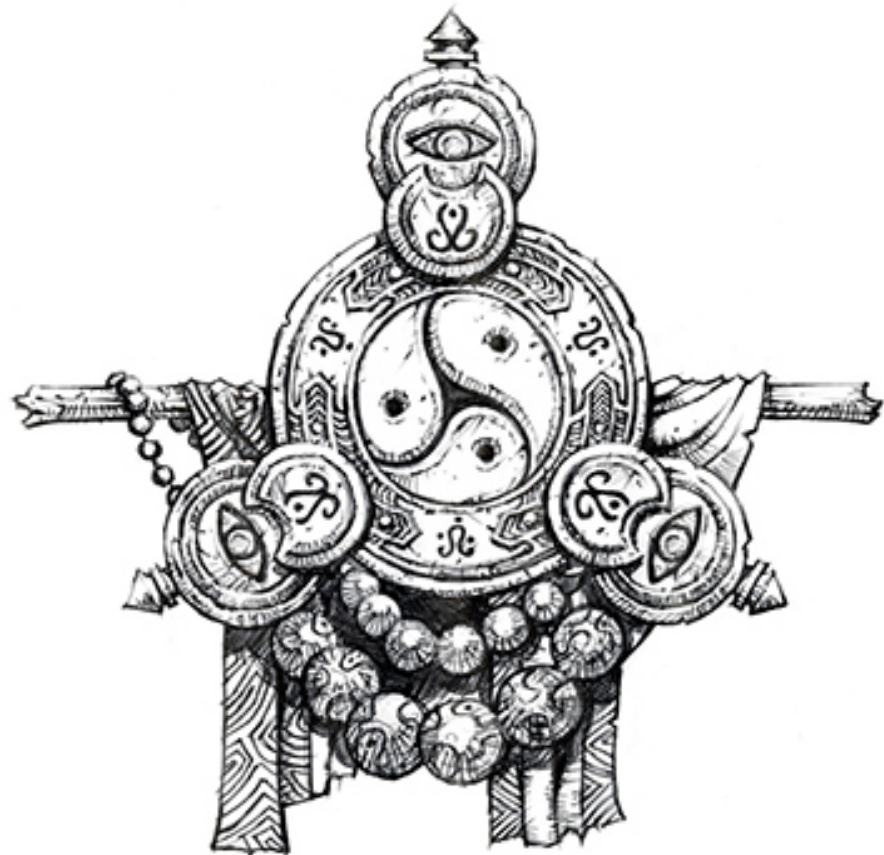
“He was not a demon, but he is dead nonetheless,” Zhota answered.

Zhota removed the sash binding Mishka’s hands and then walked the boy to his mother’s head. He wanted to give Mishka a chance to say farewell before the monk gave it to the gods. But the child only replied, “No . . . I don’t need to. I have the song.”

After the work was finished, Zhota pondered which direction to set out in. He was unsure how the Patriarch would react when Akyev failed to return with evidence of Mishka’s death. Regardless, Zhota knew it would be nearly impossible for the ruler to find another monk like the Unyielding—one unopposed to carrying out acts of wanton destruction and cruelty that went against the nature of balance.

Despite the terrible things he had learned of late, Zhota found solace in the fact that Akyev and the Patriarch were aberrations. Like the state of the Gorgorra itself, they were evidence of the troubling times that had settled on the world, wrongs that could be righted. Other monks, honorable warriors who would never have done what Akyev had, were risking their lives to drive back the burgeoning forces of chaos. They had not closed their eyes to the righteous tenets upon which the monk order had been founded, and neither would Zhota.

He led Mishka by the hand out of the clearing and turned north toward Ivgorod, intent on bringing word of everything that had transpired to his order’s attention. His path had never been so clear as it was now, and for the first time in his life, he felt as if he truly understood what it meant to be a monk.





# Firefly

Michael Chu

I ask your forgiveness, for there is much to speak of the wizard, and I am the only one who can tell all there is of her story. This is my burden, as is what awaits after. The ending is no great mystery. It is written in the shattered stones and broken walls that surround us, and whispered in the rumors that tumble from every mouth.

But on the subject of magic, nothing is so simple, and be certain that what you may have seen and heard is not the whole tale.

While I convalesced here in my bed, assured by the physicians that I would live, I had little else but to sift through the fading recollections of days past, searching for the pattern that portended this great catastrophe. I know her better than anyone, better than she knows herself, though she would never admit to the truth of that. She may be the most powerful mage of our time. She is pure of heart and wants nothing but to do good, but she is possessed with the foolishness and invincibility that come of youth and brilliance. There is no rule she would not break, and she has never understood the words *cannot* and *should not*. That has been so ever since the first time we met years ago.

A day much like this.

• • •

Isendra the sorceress swept into my chambers, herding a young girl before her. The two were as different as fire and ice. Isendra was regal and resplendent in her fine green robes and gold jewelry, while the girl reminded me of a bird, her head swiveling back and forth and her eyes darting, fascinated by the things around her: the books on my shelves, the rows of bottles that were filled with strange liquids and powders, and arcane devices whose uses were a mystery to me. The girl's robes were little more than rags tattered and stained with sweat and dirt. She could have passed for one of the roaming beggar children who preyed upon rich merchants in the Caldeum bazaar. Her long dark hair was a tangled mess, dry and brittle, and as caked with dust and mud as the rest of her. Her skin was browned by the sun, and her lips were cracked and peeling.

"So, this is the girl?" I asked Isendra, looking at the disheveled child standing in front of her.

Isendra regarded the girl dubiously. "I found her in the courtyard, dueling with Mattiz, Allern, and Taliya." The sorceress's voice dripped displeasure. "They were eager to accept her challenge."

"She seems no worse for the experience," I said. "The others?"

"Mattiz and Allern are being tended to. Taliya suffered injury only to her pride."

The girl grinned at that recounting.

"Perhaps it is for the best," I said. "Those three might benefit from a lesson in humility. I will deal with them later."

"But you will deal with me now, old man," said the girl. She had a precise, imperious voice bolstered with the confidence born of a child's surety.

"She speaks." I shared a smile with Isendra.

"That she does," said Isendra drily. "And at great length."

"Who are you?" the girl demanded. "Why have you brought me here?"

"I am Valthek, high councilor of the Vizjerei and master of the mage clans of the Yshari Sanctum."

The girl was silent for a long moment as she regarded me.

"You?" she asked finally.

I laughed. "Tell me, girl, who are you and why have you come? Surely you must have greater purpose than to send my apprentices to the infirmary."

"My name is Li-Ming. And I am not a girl," the girl said. "I am a *wizard*."

"A bold claim," I said. It took an effort to hide my amusement as the girl invoked the style of *wizard*, a title saved for the most notorious mages in history, whom common people spoke of in fear and those familiar with the arcane named with dread.

"It is more than words," Li-Ming said dangerously.

I put up a hand to calm her. "Then show me."

I had barely finished speaking when a powerful gust of wind blew across my desk, sweeping up all the papers, books, bottles of ink, and other odds and ends atop it, clattering them to the floor in a messy heap. My expression remained neutral, and the girl took it as an invitation to do more. Li-Ming spread her arms to either side, and in her upraised palms she produced twin gouts of flame that licked up toward the ceiling, the explosive blast of hot air causing her hair to blow out and away from the columns of fire, whose

reflections flickered in her brown eyes.

I shrugged. "A conjuror's tricks."

Li-Ming's jaw set in frustration. She closed her hands, and the flames disappeared, though the feeling of heat remained. With another movement of her arm, ribbons of incandescent red and orange burst into life and danced in serpentine shapes at the center of my desk. She waved her arm again, and the rows of books slid from my shelves, hanging in midair. She floated them in a line across the room until they spiraled around her as though they were caught in a whirlwind, then one by one she stacked them in the shape of a throne. She sat down in it, facing me.

Li-Ming raised an eyebrow, and I responded with slow, measured applause.

"Is that your best, girl?" I asked. I waved my hand dismissively, and the flames on my desk went out and the books she sat upon collapsed into a pile. Li-Ming sprang to her feet before she fell with them. "People feared the mages they named wizards. Wizards drove the world to the brink of destruction time and time again, mages of such untamed power that the earth trembled at their machinations. They treated with the demons of the Burning Hells and made pacts to give us all to ruin. They cheated death and tore the very fabric of creation. You have mixed up an old man's things and set a fire to his desk."

"I can do more," she said defensively. "Someday, I mean to be the greatest wizard of all."

"In my experience, one can wait a very long time for someday and still be disappointed when it comes."

"Have you heard of the miracle of the Heron River Valley?" she asked.

"I have heard a story of that place. Some business of a drought and a young girl who tried to set things right," I said offhand. "I believe they called her a wizard."

"I am that wizard," Li-Ming said proudly. "It had been months since the last rains, and the Heron River had dwindled to a trickle, and the fields had gone dry and brown. The people of the valley thought there was nothing to be done but to wait for the gods to save us. But I knew I could do what the gods would not."

"You may find it prudent not to blaspheme the gods so lightly," I said.

She ignored my interruption. "I looked for what water I could. I drew it from pools deep below the ground and gathered the last thin stream that inched along the cracked clay of the riverbed. I took it all and cast it into the



wind and tried to create a storm. Nothing happened at first, and people said I was a foolish girl waving my arms and praying for rain. But I knew. Hours passed, and the clear sky darkened. Faint gray clouds appeared where before there had been none, stretching across the horizon and growing until even the sun was hidden behind them. They turned to the color of night, looming clouds heavy with rain, drawing their shadows across the valley. Those who had laughed began to believe. The sound of thunder echoed from every direction, and flashes of lightning lit the clouds from within. The air grew wet, and I could feel the damp on my skin as mist crept down from the mountains. The mist became a drizzle, the drizzle a shower, then a downpour. The earth drank it all, and the Heron River flowed again. That is what I can do.”

Isendra was incredulous. “No child could have done that.”

“That it is beyond your abilities does not mean it is beyond mine,” Li-Ming said to the sorceress, who was two decades her elder.

“I was once as skeptical as you,” I said to Isendra, “but I have had the truth of it, and it is as she says. Though she has left out certain details.”

The grin on Li-Ming’s face faded, though her chin still had a defiant set to it.

I continued. “After the rain came and went, the months that followed saw the drought return, and worse than before. The people pointed their fingers at the wizard who had brought the rain, putting all blame upon her shoulders.”

Li-Ming said, her voice soft, “Those who had praised me demanded I be sent away. My father and mother agreed. I only wished to help. I did not know what would happen.”

“People do not trust mages. They fear what they do not comprehend. Any mage trained in the Yshari Sanctum would have known the danger of what you attempted.” I offered a smile. “And yet, had those mages tried what you attempted, I have little faith that they could have achieved a piece of what you accomplished.”

Li-Ming sensed the change in my demeanor. “Then teach me.”

“I had considered it, but now that I have your measure, I do not know if it is within you to be a student here. You have much to learn, more to unlearn, and I wonder that you have the will to see it through.”

“How can you say that? I am stronger than any of your apprentices. Bring them here, and I will show you! I will fight you if that is what you wish, old man. It does not matter. I came across sea and desert to study here, and I will.”

“It is not for you to decide. The decision rests with me,” I said.

“Let me teach her,” said Isendra abruptly.

“What?” I asked.

Li-Ming looked dubiously at the sorceress.

“There is something about this girl. As you say, it may be fruitless, but I can see as well as you that she has potential, and the time may come when we will need her and regret that we sent her away.” Isendra smiled. “And perhaps I see a little of myself in her.”

Li-Ming shook her head. “I do not want you. I want the old man to teach me.”

Isendra scowled. “You should be pleased. I went to war against the Lords of Hell while you were nothing more than a thought in your parents’ imaginations. I have not done all that I have so I could teach a disrespectful child magic, but that is my offer.”

“And my answer is no,” Li-Ming said.

I had been silent as I considered whether to agree to this partnership. Isendra was peerless in her ability, almost my equal, and she had experience that might intrigue the girl and keep her attention. But I had my concerns.

“Quiet, both of you,” I said as I stood. “Isendra’s knowledge of elemental magic rivals mine, and I believe that you and she will find you have much in common. For you, there is no better teacher. Were I you, I would hope that I had not convinced Isendra to reconsider. You will have her, or we shall see how you fare on your own. History is littered with forgotten wizards who amounted to nothing.”

Li-Ming chewed upon her lip. “Have I no say in this matter?”

“No,” I said. “You do not.”

• • •

That was our first meeting, and I still remember it vividly. Isendra embraced her role in teaching Li-Ming. She became a mentor to the girl, and Li-Ming gained a deep respect for the sorceress. They were more alike than Isendra or I had suspected. But Li-Ming quickly exhausted the extent of Isendra’s knowledge. Their relationship changed, and Li-Ming began to treat the sorceress as an equal rather than a teacher. Isendra was changing too, and that worried me as well. She was far too permissive with Li-Ming’s behavior. With nothing to learn, Li-Ming followed the vein of curiosity that had always driven

her, and that was when the trouble started.

When I caught Li-Ming nosing about the sections of the library that held forbidden texts considered to be too dangerous for study, I knew something must be done. I took over Li-Ming's training against Isendra's protests and put a watchful eye over her. I tried to introduce structure to Li-Ming's life and present a course of study that would turn her interests toward more acceptable pursuits.

Without the responsibility for teaching Li-Ming, Isendra had little to keep her at the Yshari Sanctum, and she spent few of her days here. She remained a great friend, however, and I always found her advice to be invaluable. When we three were reunited several years later, Isendra had settled into life away from the Sanctum and away from her former student.

I wish I could seek her counsel now.

• • •

The summer ought to have given way to the cooler days of fall and winter, as summer always had, but after a year had passed, the sweltering heat remained, from the empire's southern reaches to the Dry Steppes in the north. It was still early in the reign of Emperor Hakan II, and the superstitious whispered about what they perceived to be an ill omen for his rule. Even for the desert, the weather was like nothing that had come before. Unrelenting heat covered everything, while sandstorms and dune twisters scythed across the face of the burning wastes. The vast sand seas were true to their name. The dunes moved, creating an ever-shifting landscape, unearthing massive rock outcroppings with edges sharp enough to tear flesh and bone like monstrous teeth rising from the sand, which had turned from yellow to red as though tinged by blood. The desert swallowed villages whole, leaving bare stone foundations or a handful of mud bricks where homes had once stood.

Another year passed, and summer showed no sign of ending. The empire withered. I sent a message to Isendra, asking her to investigate possible causes for the weather while I took Li-Ming and set out from Caldeum, plunging into the heart of the desert to see what we could discover for ourselves.

But several months after we began our journey, we were returning home with more questions than answers. Li-Ming and I rode upon camels as Lut Bahadur slowly came into view over the horizon, one of the largest towns in

the Borderlands, where desert habitation was possible though not easy. The heat was something alive. It burrowed into you, seeped beneath your skin, and eliminated all memory of cold. I wore a light cotton robe with a hood pulled up over my head, and had a cloth wound across my face to protect myself from the howling sandstorms, leaving my eyes uncovered. Li-Ming had grown to a young woman by then. The traces of girlish innocence had faded away, and she was now often possessed of a serious expression that gave way at times to a well-practiced smirk. She wore her finest robes despite the heat, drawing upon a trickle of magic to sustain herself.

“The end of our search approaches, Li-Ming, and yet it seems we are no closer to puzzling out the mystery of this unending summer,” I said as we rode.

“I cannot explain it, Master. I believe that something is consuming the desert. It feels as though the edges of reality weaken, like when you look into the distance in a dream,” she said.

“Perhaps you perceive the ocean of fire and molten rock that lies beneath us.”

“Or the sun that looms above us?” she asked testily. “You make light of what I say, but I am certain this weather has no natural cause. When I searched the archives in the city—”

“Quite a feat when you are forbidden to leave the Yshari Sanctum.”

She gave me a withering look. “I examined the records of the weather. We have never known a period of such interminable heat. The Dahlgur Oasis might go dry if it does not end soon.”

“On this I do not disagree.”

“But it is more than that,” Li-Ming said. “There is something in the air that is unlike anything I have ever felt before. It should be cool, and yet it is not. The winds should be calm, and yet they are not.”

“Is it possible that you grasp for an explanation where there is none to be found? Despite all we know of this world and of the stars beyond, it may be that this is as natural as an age of snow and ice. You have not lived as long as I, and the mysteries of the universe must seem new to you.”

“If you believe that, then why are we here, Master?” she asked.

I laughed. “You have me there.”

Li-Ming looked toward the town that crept up before us. “Ours is a world of great magic. Consider the Dreadlands. An entire land destroyed, and who is to say it did not start like this? It has been near twenty years since the Lords of

Hell walked this earth. Isendra told me of the invasion that never was. Perhaps now it is coming.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you are so eager to make your destiny that you would welcome ruin upon our world,” I said.

“It is my destiny. And it will come sooner than later,” she said.

This was Li-Ming’s notion, and one that Isendra shared. Li-Ming believed that she would protect the world against an invasion of Hell as Isendra had done before her. It came from a book Li-Ming had read, a prophecy hidden in one of the library’s tomes, detailing the signs portending the return of the Lords of Hell. Isendra had often tried to convince me that the prophecy was true, and though I was not blind to the danger that might await, I remained skeptical.

Li-Ming had many talents, but her greatest was in the reading of magic. She was a perceptive girl, and finding the hidden structures of spells came to her with ease. I once asked Li-Ming what it was like to see as she did. She described the invisible threads of magic and how auras of arcane power swirled around mages as they cast their spells, and how there was an afterimage, like the green and red spots burned upon your vision after you gaze into the sun. She could smell, taste, see, and feel magic. So if Li-Ming told me the endless summer was guided by some mortal hand or other great power, I was inclined to believe her, for that was my own opinion as well. But I held it to myself, for if it was true, I worried about what it could mean.

Caldeum was situated atop a long, flat plain that rose above the rest of the desert. The plain ended in sheer cliffs, and at their base was Lut Bahadur. Above the town’s walls, windmills turned placidly in normal times, but many of them had been ripped and torn by the fierce winds. Bleached and tattered canvas awnings had been pulled across wooden beams that stuck out of the mud roofs to offer some protection against the sun. But it mattered not, for in the shade there was little respite. Almost all of the people had taken to wrapping their faces as I had, so I could see nothing other than the expressions of their eyes, eyes filled with fear, or without hope when they were not.

The town was dying.

Li-Ming was using an enchantment she favored, a thin layer of frost that circled around her. The ice in the air melted as fast as she created it, and so to the eye it appeared as though Li-Ming was surrounded by a light mist. When she dismounted from her camel, she ignored the stirrup, instead drifting down

on unseen currents until she landed softly upon the ground. That drew looks from the few people who were on the street.

“Must you use your magic so carelessly?” I asked, vexed.

“This heat is unbearable, Master. I do not see how you can stand it,” she said.

“I endure it because I must,” I said as I climbed down from my camel. “You will win us no friends with your behavior.”

“You only concern yourself with my behavior when it is convenient to reprimand me,” Li-Ming said.

“Can I be held to blame when it is such a frequent occurrence?”

Despite her protests, Li-Ming let the spell dissipate as she walked over to me. The faint moisture that surrounded her faded into nothingness, drunk by the desert air.

“We are here to observe and ask questions, nothing more,” I reminded Li-Ming.

“Observe and ask questions. Nothing more,” Li-Ming echoed.

“See to the camels,” I said, not rising to the bait.

“I thought I was observing.”

“After you see to the camels,” I said. “I will go find Isendra.”

“Isendra is here?” Li-Ming brightened.

“She is. Now, stay here,” I said. “And Li-Ming?”

“Yes, Master?” she asked solicitously.

“Try to stay out of trouble.”

Li-Ming grinned.

Sheltered against the side of a canyon, the town was protected from the scalding wind when it blew from west to east, but when it blew from another direction, Lut Bahadur was exposed. There was evidence that the townsfolk had tried to build a windbreak, but it had long since been toppled. On that day the wind was blowing from the east, but it was not so fierce that it was dangerous to be out of doors. Li-Ming tethered the camels near the well, and then she peered over the edge. I did not need to look to know that it was empty. Any water would be stored in jars, though there was little chance they had much left. I went to one of the men sitting in the unhelpful shadow of a tattered awning, light leaking through the holes and tears, to ask where I might find the sorceress.

Suddenly the earth heaved, rolling like waves beneath us, and then with a

violent lurch I was knocked to the hard-packed dirt. As I looked up, I saw Li-Ming with her arms raised to her shoulders, her fingers moving as though she pulled the strings of puppets in a play.

This was her work.

“Li-Ming! What have you done?” I shouted as the shaking continued.

“Come here and see for yourself,” she said proudly, pointing to the well. I stood and walked to the lip while the ground still shuddered. When I leaned over the edge, I saw the faint shimmer of water seeping over the dry crust at the well’s base. Li-Ming had brought water to the town, water it would need to survive.

“I found water deep below, perhaps an underground river that feeds into the Dahlgur Oasis. I diverted its flow to fill the well. This town—”

“Enough,” I said sternly. “I told you that we are here to observe and ask questions. Nothing more.”

“We could do more, Master. We could build a new windbreak or repair what has been destroyed by the sandstorms. You always say we should do nothing. Why else were we given these abilities but to help people?” she said. “I have been thinking, Master, that perhaps with our magic, we could reverse the heat and bring an end to this summer.”

“We will do nothing. It is not our place, and you better than most should understand what could happen if we attempt to alter the weather to such a large scale,” I chided her. “Have you already forgotten your failure?”

“I am not the girl I once was. I have learned. And I will never leave people to suffer!” Li-Ming said. “Tell me why we cannot help them. Tell me why it is so wrong.”

I pointed to the well that now gurgled with water. “Where does this water come from? Where did it go? Will the water that flowed to the oasis flow here without cost? You cannot create from nothing. You solve one problem and make ten more.” Li-Ming was young, and she did not concern herself with details. She acted on impulse, seeing only what happened in the moment.

“The water was there, Master. The people could have dug the well deeper themselves. I made it easier.”

“Your altruism is a credit to you, Li-Ming, but we mages cannot do this. Yes, there are times when we can use our magic to aid people, but it cannot be every time, and we must weigh the costs carefully before we act. This is not a matter of argument. You will listen to me.”

"But Li-Ming is right," came a woman's voice in response.

"Isendra!" exclaimed Li-Ming as she ran over to the sorceress, who embraced her fondly.

"This is not our concern, nor is it yours," I said. "Li-Ming, let me talk with Isendra. Alone."

Li-Ming frowned and opened her mouth to speak, but she acquiesced and left us, joining the men and women who were fetching jars and other vessels to fill with the newfound water. I watched as she went among them.

"If these people's troubles are not our concern, why are we here?" asked Isendra.

"Sometimes you and she are too much alike," I grumbled. "She said the same."

"And how has she been?"

"The years change little. She is as impetuous as she was the first day we met her. I wonder if we made the wrong decision by teaching her anything."

"She is not content to leave matters as they are. She wants to give people a better life."

"Li-Ming has no thought of the price. She lives in the here and now, while those like you and me must look further. That is our burden, to lead the mage clans."

"Li-Ming may be right. We three are the most powerful mages who live today. Between us, why should we not be able to end this summer and restore the seasons to their normal order?"

"That is a thought moved by emotion, not reason," I said. "We cannot change the weather. It will not work."

"Li-Ming would not say that," said Isendra.

"You are not Li-Ming. She is a foolish girl."

"You see a girl. I see a woman who might save this world."

"Prophecy. Destiny." I shrugged. "Who is to say what the next day will bring? If all that comes to pass, you and I will face it, and perhaps Li-Ming will fight with us. But she is not the only one who can. And how are we to know that those prophecies are true? The Lords of Hell should have struck twenty years ago. Our greatest fear must be of ourselves."

"You have become a timid man in your old age," said Isendra.

"And you have become reckless in yours," I said. "You will not interfere."

"I will do what I must," Isendra said as she made to go. "As will you."



After Isendra had left, I watched Li-Ming. She was tending to a child who had collapsed from the heat. He was feverish. His cheeks were red, and sweat beaded upon his skin. Li-Ming cast a spell, and the air around her hands grew cold. When she held them above the boy's face, he sighed peacefully as the faintest of breezes whispered against the strands of hair matted to his forehead.

"Thank you," said the boy's mother. "I hear the others talk, but you have restored our well, and you have saved my son. That does not seem so wrong to me."

Li-Ming smiled as she stood, but her expression was grim by the time she reached me.

"These people will die," Li-Ming said.

"They might. But our interference might not prevent that."

"We will never know, will we?" Li-Ming said, her brown eyes searching mine. "Will you see their faces in your dreams?"

"Theirs and more. It is our curse, Li-Ming, and you will come to know this pain greatly." I placed my hand gently upon her shoulder. "Let us go."

• • •

I know that I told you much of that story when last we spoke, but I left out Li-Ming's part in it, for it was Isendra who concerned me then. You will no doubt agree that my actions were correct, but I am no monster. As always when faced with such situations, I felt a great sadness that I could not do as Li-Ming wished and help the people of Lut Bahadur. It was a familiar argument, and one that we had often. I sympathized with her more than she knew.

It was a short while later when you and I first met, for I worried over Isendra and what course of action she might undertake. In my heart I was certain that the matter was not closed.

I suspect you know some of what came next, details that I may not. This, I think, was where Li-Ming began to turn to the decision that led us to this disaster.

• • •

It was months after when, in the deep hours of the night, my door creaked open and Li-Ming entered. It was not her habit to knock, a peculiarity of her character that I had come to live with, though she had visited little enough of

late. Li-Ming looked as though she had been roused from sleep. Her normally impeccable robes had been thrown on in haste, and I could see in the furtiveness of her eyes that something troubled her.

“Did you feel it?” she asked.

“I felt nothing.”

“A great spell was cast to the east. Not far from here. We need to go,” Li-Ming said. “Something has happened.”

“We can go in the morning,” I said.

“Do you have such a great need for rest, old man?” she said irritably, then grew serious. “It was Isendra, Master.”

I was silent, not trusting myself to speak, but I relented.

We left the Yshari Sanctum to head toward Lut Bahadur. It should have been winter, the third since the summer began, but the night air was as dry and hot as the middle of the day, with only the absence of the sun providing the smallest measure of comfort. I felt as though I were standing next to a glassblower’s kiln. Sweat dripped down my body, and my robes clung to my skin.

Li-Ming said nothing as we rode.

Lut Bahadur was quiet when we arrived. Other than the wind, which even at this hour blew sand and dust across the desert, there was no sound but the faint flapping of hides and clothes that were hung on lines next to every hut. Not a soul walked the streets, though lanterns still burned. But something else seized at my thoughts.

The air was cold.

A shiver ran between my shoulders and along my arms as we entered the town. The chill wind brushed over me, and I had not felt it for so long that at first my body rejected it. But I could feel my muscles slowly relaxing as though the tension caused by the endless heat could now, by the soft caress of the gentle breeze, be undone.

Li-Ming summoned orbs of light that she sent across the town, and as they disappeared from sight, their flickering illumination lit the ground and the sides of the buildings that they passed. That was something new. I had not seen that spell before.

“What is that?” I asked her.

Li-Ming ignored my question. “Do you feel the air?”

“It is cold,” I said.

"No, not that," Li-Ming said. "Electricity courses through it. I have never felt it so strongly, so I did not know if it was a spell that was the cause, or something else entirely." She fell silent, and I sensed nothing but the worry that emanated from my student.

I followed her as she made her way purposefully down the curving roads, turning every so often. Though it was late, it was too quiet for a sleeping town. The cloth awnings drifted soundlessly as the wind faded. There was no sound at all but that of our footsteps against the hard earth. In my ears, I could hear the beating of my anxious heart. Li-Ming and I walked along the abandoned streets until finally she approached the slatted door of a house and pushed it open.

"What are you doing?" I hissed as I ducked through the doorway after Li-Ming, all too conscious of the crunch of my boots on the dirt.

As I opened my mouth to lecture her and extended a hand to grab her shoulder, the words died with my breath, and my hand froze. Inside the house, it was as though time had stopped. A man, woman, and child were seated around a large table, but they did not acknowledge our sudden intrusion. Instead, they were as cold and unmoving as statues. The woman's lips were parted around a word that hung in the air half-spoken, never to be heard. At her side, the man had turned to regard the child, who was reaching an arm across the table. The food appeared to have been recently cooked and served, but there was no heat. It was as though the moonlight had leached all color and life from the scene before me.

"What happened here?" I whispered.

"I do not know for sure," Li-Ming said as she paced through the room, her eyes seeing but not seeing as she traced the invisible weaving of arcane energies that I could not. "The shape of the spell fades with time. It is like trying to learn the size of a storm after it has passed, with only puddles upon the ground and the lingering clouds in the air to judge."

I stepped outside, not wishing to see any longer, and waited for Li-Ming to emerge. A few minutes later, she did.

"She tried to take the heat from the air to make it cool, but she lost control of her spell. The cold broke through and the air froze."

"She?" I asked, though of course I knew the answer.

"Isendra. I recognize the pattern of her magic, just as I know yours. And there are few mages who could have attempted to perform the spell that was

cast here.”

“How did it happen?”

“She was not strong enough. It may have worked in the beginning, but when it became too powerful for her, the structure of her spell grew weak and unraveled.” Li-Ming’s voice wavered. “This is my fault.”

“Isendra may need us,” I said. “We must look for her.”

Li-Ming cast her floating spheres of light to aid us in our search, but in all the houses, the same sight greeted us: every soul frozen as though we had come across some strange statuary, some silent graveyard. And no sign of Isendra.

It was an hour later when we found her. The hut looked much the same as the others, but Li-Ming was sure. She stopped for a moment before she pushed open the door of wooden slats. I followed after her.

Inside, this house was different. Whereas the others sat in eerie stillness, it was clear that a violent struggle had unfolded here. There were large black scorch marks on the walls where the mud bricks had been burned by fire. The tables and chairs and other furniture had been burnt and toppled, and the smell of ashes was thick. Here I could feel something, but it was not the evidence of magic as Li-Ming felt. It was a primal, instinctual reaction that made the hairs on my arms stand. Then I saw what I had feared to see: Isendra, her body splayed out like a doll that had been carelessly cast aside. Blood pooled across the wooden floor from wounds on her arms and her stomach. Her skin was blackened in places, and her head was turned unnaturally to one side, her eyes looking vacantly at the floorboards.

Li-Ming rushed to Isendra and knelt next to her. She cradled the lifeless form of the sorceress in her arms while tears spilled from her eyes.

“What happened here, Master?” she asked.

I shook my head. We stayed there in silence and grief until Li-Ming delicately released Isendra’s body and stood again.

“Not all of this fire was created with magic,” Li-Ming said. “The magic from Isendra’s spell is already fading, but some of this is newer. This happened after.”

“When a mage loses control of a spell, the results can be chaotic,” I said. “I have seen it many a time.”

“She was not killed by magic, Master,” Li-Ming said.

“Perhaps not, but her magic surely led to this. This town is destroyed, and she is dead. Whom has she protected? Whom has she saved? Answer me that!”

My voice was loud in the unnatural silence.

“You are blind,” Li-Ming said angrily. “Isendra tried to help them. That is better than anything you have ever done. I will not stand by and watch people suffer. Not any longer, and not when the time comes that the world needs me.”

“Will people pay with their lives for your failure as this town has paid for Isendra’s? Are you to sacrifice innocents for your own thoughts of heroism?” I asked.

“No,” Li-Ming said softly.

For a moment my brilliant student seemed very much a girl still. I gazed sadly at the fallen shape of my friend, who looked like someone else in death, and said nothing more.

When it was time to go, Li-Ming set fire to the hut with her spell, Isendra, who was once her master, lying peacefully upon the floor. Isendra’s eyes were closed, her duty done. As the fire grew and the flames rose higher, water beaded and dripped down her face like tears. I led Li-Ming away from the house by the arm.

Li-Ming’s eyes met mine. The sorrow and anger were still there, but what I saw most of all was a grim determination. “But I will not fail.”

We passed through the silent town, lost in our own thoughts. The knowledge of what each home contained within, hidden from view, unsettled me. I looked back upon Lut Bahadur as we rode away, the narrow hilly roads illuminated by the light of a thousand flickering lanterns that faded into the night like a swarm of fireflies.

• • •

I believe that was when Li-Ming began to understand the danger of her actions and what failure could mean. We did not speak again of Isendra’s death until the last time I saw her. Did Li-Ming know why Isendra had died? Did she know how Isendra had been killed?

The events in Lut Bahadur did not dim Li-Ming’s desire for knowledge in the least. She was obsessed with learning more so that she might succeed where Isendra had failed. She spent most of her hours in the library and always found her way to where she was forbidden to go but, despite my efforts, it was impossible to keep her from. She learned temporal magic from the writings of mages who had extended their lives far beyond those of normal men, and read

of others who had so empowered themselves that death's gaze passed over them, mages like the mad wizard Zoltun Kulle, who replaced his blood with the sands of time and could not be killed, only imprisoned. With her understanding of the unseen web of arcane power, she taught herself the ability to project from one place to another with teleportation magic. She mastered the trick of shaping living illusions and was able to create two perfect images of herself that mimicked her actions. There were scrolls and diagrams that showed how to defy and bend the invisible forces of the universe. Her power grew great, as did my concern.

The first time we met, I told you only to watch Isendra for fear of what madness she might choose to undertake. I do not question the decision you made.

It was not long after that Li-Ming made her own choice.

• • •

The great hall of the Yshari Sanctum was a massive octagonal room with vaulted ceilings painted with the history of the mage clans. Eight sets of doors led to hallways and other chambers, though none as grand as this one. Every inch of the walls was covered in spectacular tapestries, and the stone tiles of the floor were quarried from the lands beyond the Twin Seas.

When I entered, Li-Ming was standing at the center of the room, regarding the patterns on the floor. The chamber was empty but for the two of us.

"I did not wish to depart before telling you that I was going," she said when she heard my footsteps. "I believed that I owed you that much."

"And where are you going?" I asked.

"A star streaked across the heavens today and fell to the west. It is the sign I have waited for. You have read the books of prophecy as I have. You know what this means. We expected the invasion of Hell twenty years ago, and it never came. The stories of grim tidings I hear every day in the bazaar have made me certain. My time has come."

"Your place is here as a student at the Yshari Sanctum. You are a dangerous spark, and the world is dry and given to the flame. You cannot control yourself, and if I allow you to leave, what you might do is worse than any other doom I can imagine."

"There is nothing left for me to learn from you," she said.

“Do you remember the day we first met, Li-Ming? You know more than you did then, but you have gained little wisdom. If you leave, you will only be a wizard.”

“Your wisdom I do not need. I *am* a wizard, and I will protect the world if the mages will not.” She turned away from me. “Let me go to my fate. You will be safe here with your books and your fears.”

I raised my hands and, channeling a thin trickle of the arcane, pulled the doors leading from the Sanctum shut. One by one, they crashed closed until we were trapped within the hall.

“Then I must stop you.” I carefully rolled up the long sleeves of my robe. “You were my greatest student, Li-Ming, and I believed that in time you might succeed me and lead the mage clans. I believed you could surpass me. I am sorry that it has come to this. Perhaps it is I who has failed.”

“You were a good teacher, Master. And I did learn your lessons. But you will never understand the gift we were given. That is why I will surpass you,” she said, her words echoing in the room.

I saw her eyes narrowing as she focused inward. The torches in their sconces high up on the walls flickered as we began to draw in the energy around us. Li-Ming’s hands went to either side, her fingers curling as we stood facing each other like two immovable rocks in the middle of a river. I lowered my staff and held it before me, using it as a focus for my own power.

“Have you ever wondered, Master, whether I was stronger than you?” she asked.

“No.” I smiled. “I have not.”

I waited for Li-Ming to act first. She conjured balls of flame that absorbed the light from the torches and seemed to dim the light from outside, but that was just a trick of my eyes as they adjusted to the darkness. She flung the burning orbs at me. I pushed them away and threw them to the tiles, where they scorched the marble but did not touch me. The air ignited, and I felt a shortness of breath. Li-Ming looked at me with an amused expression, but she readied her next attack. She tore massive pieces of stone from the ceiling, setting them ablaze and showering them toward where I was standing. I raised my staff above my head and unleashed a wave of force that grew outward, forming a shimmering dome that expanded and caught the falling meteors, shattering them into a film of dust and some larger fragments that pinged against the floor. The translucent shield had protected me from the attack, but

the reverberation of it echoed painfully through my body. In my younger days, it would have affected me less, but now it drove me to a knee. Around me the marble tiles cracked and tore from the shock like a broken mirror, and even Li-Ming was driven backward.

“You will have to do better than that,” I said.

Li-Ming growled in frustration, and this time fire shot from the palms of her hands in thin beams of iridescent flame that carved toward me, and it was all I could do to dodge and avoid their scything arcs. Where they struck stone, they sheared clean through like the cut of a knife. They rent the marble tiles, and I could feel the floor begin to fall away. I extended my grasp outward, finding the stones that threatened to crumble and binding them with invisible thread. If I released it, the floor would collapse, and I with it. Below the great hall are catacombs, not solid earth, and I did not believe I could survive that fall. The strain of holding everything together was great, and my knuckles turned white as I gripped my staff.

Li-Ming looked to my side of the hall, where the floor was cracked and broken. She moved her hand, and the stone beneath my feet gave way, shattering into nothing. Isendra had taught me a trick once, and it came to me unconsciously. One moment I was standing on the collapsing tile. The next, I appeared a few feet away with surer footing. The agony of teleportation, even across such a short distance, was immense. I felt as if I had been torn into a thousand pieces, then sewn back together with burning thread. It was hard to know which had caused the greater pain. Li-Ming methodically destroyed my new perch, and I moved again. We repeated this dance for a while longer, but my reactions were slowing with each exchange, and I could feel the battle taking its toll upon my old, frail body.

I drove my staff down to the floor, and thunder rumbled from the impact. In the blink of an eye, arcs of lightning shot through the hall, and where they struck, the floor exploded, throwing up shards of the marble tile. The lightning burst with a percussive explosion and lanced toward Li-Ming. But it never found her. The jagged streaks of light were frozen in the air, while Li-Ming had her arms extended, concentrating intensely. Undeterred, I continued to summon the lightning, and the storm grew worse and worse. The lightning hung over Li-Ming like an unfurled fan until she could hold it at bay no longer. The electricity arced through her, driving her to the floor and exploding around her in a cascade of sparks and white light.



Li-Ming disappeared.

Unsure of her intentions, I ignited the storm, which turned from electricity to a raging inferno that filled the entirety of the great hall and seared my own flesh, threatening to exhaust the last of my strength. When Li-Ming blinked into view again, she was engulfed in flames. I heard her scream as the fire burned her. The tiles shifted beneath my feet as I approached. Clinging to the spell that kept the floor from falling, I leveled my staff at her crumpled form.

The ground felt solid as I stood before Li-Ming, and I was relieved that it supported my weight.

“You still have much to learn, Li-Ming.”

I thrust my staff at her, but where I should have struck flesh, Li-Ming’s body dissipated into nothing.

I turned just in time to see her behind me. I opened my mouth and tried to grasp a spell, any spell, but an explosion rocked my vision. I lost control of the spell, lost my hold on the broken floor beneath me. It heaved and shattered, and everything fell away. I fell and fell, tumbling into darkness, until I crashed into the cold stone floor of the catacombs.

As I lay there, my body battered, I was surrounded by the smell of fire and dust. Li-Ming floated down from above and landed, kneeling next to me.

She said, “You believe that I have not learned your lessons, but I have. I learned the lesson of Isendra’s death. But I was given my power for a reason, and it is my burden to use it. I will use it, not fear it as you do.”

“What if you cannot control it?” My voice came in a rasp. “With your power, you could break the world.”

“Then the world will weep.” She turned her back to me. “There is one thing I must ask you, Master.”

I was silent, for I knew what must follow. There was nothing else that Li-Ming had to learn from me.

“Why did Isendra die? Tell me the truth,” she said.

“I know no more than you.”

Li-Ming nodded and stepped into the air.

I opened my mouth to speak again, but the shadows consumed everything.

• • •

When I woke days later, Li-Ming had left the city, and none knew where she

had gone. They have told me that it was impossible to hide what had occurred, for all throughout Caldeum the column of smoke that rose from the Sanctum could be seen, and from the outside the scars of our battle were obvious in the sheared and shattered stone.

Here my knowledge of the wizard's story ends, and my decision awaits. When mages threatened to tear our world apart, a Vizjerei master founded the order of the assassins, the mage hunters, who would ensure that we could not grow so powerful that all would be imperiled. He stood here in my place, speaking to the first assassin just as we speak now, and consigned many a great mage to death.

For my part, this will be the second time I have done so.

I believe she knew that it was I who sent you to watch Isendra, and despite what that must mean, she let me live, knowing that as I once sealed Isendra's death, I might do the same to her.

But understand this: Li-Ming did not lie. There are tomes within our library that describe the events that may now be coming to pass. It all begins with a star falling from the heavens, and such a star did fall the day I fought Li-Ming.

I know the true nature of magic and of who and what I am. Li-Ming knows these things as well, but she has come to a different course. This is the puzzle put before us, assassin. I am not blind to the evil that stalks us, but I fear for what Li-Ming might seek to undertake. Thus I consign to death my brightest student, perhaps the world's best hope for salvation, and pray that I have chosen rightly.

But I remember a girl who stood before me in this very room and feared nothing. I remember a selfless young woman who wished to do good, to whom no task was too great and no feat lay outside the realm of possibility. A woman who looked to me for guidance.

She has made her choice, and I have made mine.





—FEKREDO II

# Doubtwalker

Matt Burns

The war began at sunrise, as it always did.

Benu and ten other witch doctors from the Clan of the Seven Stones stalked into the heart of the Teganze as swift and silent as panthers. Only the faint rattle of bone and iron charms dangling from their tribal masks warned of their presence. Striped in white, yellow, and red paint and decorated in bright bokai feathers, their bodies blended with the vibrant jungle around them.

Soon the emerald canopy grew thick, leaving the undergrowth in perpetual gloom. Benu pricked up his ears at every sound, listening for any hint of movement . . . any hint of his human prey.

The *Igani Bawe*, the Harvest of Souls, had come.

It was Benu's first ritual war, and his heart thundered like a drum in anticipation. Elsewhere in the wilds, perhaps close by, rival witch doctors from the Five Hills and Clouded Valley tribes were hunting as well, called to action by their high priests just as Benu and his kin had been.

The Seven Stones war party stopped to rest within the borders of the Five Hills. Two witch doctors slipped through the trees ahead to scout for signs of their enemies.

"Do you *tremble* at the battle to come?" Benu's elder, Ungate, whispered at his side. A single ivory horn, crowned by violet plumage, extended from the top of his fearsome wooden mask.

"I do not," Benu replied.

"Show me your hand."

Benu breathed to calm his nerves before obeying. He was pleased to see that his hand was motionless.

"Do you *fear* the battle to come?" Ungate edged closer, lowering his voice.

"All men fear. Such is the way of this world of shadow. My hand is still because I know this truth. If I hide from it, that emotion will control me," the young witch doctor responded.

Ungate lightly gripped Benu's shoulder in approval. The latter sighed in relief. He was not afraid, but he was anxious. He had longed for this day

throughout the years of his training. There was no greater honor than to battle in the Igani. It was this ancient ceremony that had allowed his people and their faith to endure for generations. By sundown, when the hunt drew to a close, Benu would either return home in triumph or die at the hands of a rival tribe.

Each outcome was honorable in its own way. If he captured tributes, he would earn the praise and admiration of his kin. If he himself was taken, his spirit would be freed from this shadow world and ushered into the true reality of *Mbwiru Eikura*, the Unformed Land.

Such was his destiny as a witch doctor, a guardian of umbaru heritage and a living bridge between this world and the other. So it had always been for those of his station. So it would always be.

“To live is to sacrifice.” He raised his head as his chest swelled with pride.

Ungate completed the old umbaru words. “To sacrifice is to live.”

A scout glided out of the surrounding jungle, using hand signals to relay what he had seen: a Five Hills witch doctor. Alone.

The warriors sprang into action. They forged through the undergrowth, stretching out into a tight semicircle. The jungle thinned until they emerged into an area known as the Hills of Mist. Before long, they found the man shrouded in the low-lying clouds: an elderly witch doctor, his tribal mask as scarred and weathered as his skin.

Ungate kneeled, pulling a dart blower the length of his forearm from his belt and placing it through an opening in his mask. He sent a dart laced with the poison of the uapa toads whistling toward the enemy. It pierced the man’s back before he even knew he had been found. The paralysis was swift; the elder sank to his knees in moments. That was the limit of the poison’s effects. The intent was to injure and capture. Killing opponents in this stage of the Igani was a deplorable taboo.

Clearly outnumbered and defeated, the enemy witch doctor yielded as custom dictated.

“Seven Stones . . .” he said. “You come far into my lands.”

“To find a worthy tribute,” Ungate replied. “You are the great Zuwadza, yes?”

“It is so.” The old man bowed his head.

Benu watched the exchange from afar, taking in the movements of his more experienced kin. He had studied the rules of battle well, but seeing them unfold before his eyes filled him with a sense of completion, of culminating

everything he had ever learned and believed was right.

“You are a greater warrior than I.” Ungate stepped forward and embraced Zuwadza. “Here we are enemies, but in Mbwiru Eikura we are brothers eternal. I await my chance to meet you there.”

Zuwadza rose on his own, the poison’s effects already dwindling. Benu tipped his chin down out of respect as he drew near. He envied the elder. Tonight the high priests would end his suffering. The elder’s blood and organs would be offered to the spirits of the Unformed Land not only to nourish that realm for those who would come later, but also to strengthen this world. Healthy crops, the change of seasons, and the very lives of the umbaru depended on his sacrifice. He was a hero in Benu’s eyes.

The war party set out toward home. Zuwadza observed well *Te Wok Nu’cha*, the Final March. He held his head high, at peace with the fate that awaited him.

“Leave him!” A voice cut through the mists just as Benu and his kin reached the jungle’s edge. The entire party, Zuwadza included, whirled in confusion, searching for the speaker.

“Leave him and go. There is no reason to end his life. He has much yet to teach.” A witch doctor emerged from the low clouds, adorned in paint, feathers, and mask as all participants of the Igani were. From the markings scrawled on his body, Benu learned that he was of the Five Hills.

“I am theirs by law,” Zuwadza said. From his tone, it seemed as if he was not surprised by the turn of events. “They are only acting as they have been taught.”

“The spirits do not want your life, master,” the other Five Hills witch doctor replied.

Ungate pointed a ceremonial dagger at the rival. “You are wrong to interrupt *Te Wok Nu’cha*.”

“So the high priests tell you. They command these wars, not the spirits. Life in this realm should not be given up so easily. There is no need for this sacrifice . . . this Igani. It is a tool of fear and control.”

Benu’s kin hissed in disapproval. Rage filled him as well. He had never heard of someone defying the sacred laws of the Igani. It was clear this man had been taken by madness.

“Begone!” Ungate roared.

The younger Five Hills witch doctor ignored the call, walking forward with

his open palms held in the air. "I offer all of you life. Return to your village. Ask the high priests what they have truly seen in the Unformed Land, what the spirits have said. I wish only to spare my master."

Overcome with anger, Benu drew his dagger and lunged at the heretic. The foe swiftly thrust out his hand, and a wisp of bluish-green energy exploded from his palm. The spirit bolt was carefully placed; it glanced off of Benu's shoulder with just enough force to knock him to the ground, momentarily dazed.

"Release my master. That is all I ask!" the man pleaded.

Ungate and his allies charged forward in unison. Eyes heavy with regret, the Five Hills interloper slashed his hand downward and shouted a lethal hex, which was forbidden in the Igani. The Seven Stones warriors stumbled to their knees and clutched their throats as pale violet foam boiled out of their mouths. After only a few seconds, Benu's kin lay lifeless on the ground.

"You are young." The heretic loomed over him. "Truth will come easier to you."

Benu reached for his dagger where it had fallen, but the other witch doctor kicked it aside. Far off, voices drifted through the mists. Shouts and calls no doubt drawn by the battle.

"My kin . . ." the enemy witch doctor said. "If they find you, you will be sacrificed."

"A death to be proud of!" Benu yelled. Tears welled up in his eyes at the massacre he had witnessed, at the dishonorable deaths of his kin. "Something you know nothing about!"

"No. You have barely tasted life. You do not see its blessings. *You are blind.*"

The last words rang in Benu's ears. A hex. His vision dimmed, and he thrashed wildly.

"You adhere to the commands of the high priests. *You bow to fear.*"

Another curse took hold of Benu. His deepest fears roiled up from his soul, filling him with uncontrollable terror. Although blind, he sensed his body moving, racing through the jungle, and somehow he knew where to set his feet. All the while, the voice of the heretic, the man who had defiled Benu's first Igani, whispered to him like a phantom at his side.

*"Go. Run home. Look in places unseen. Ask questions unanswered. Seek truth."*



“Speak of this to no one,” Guwate’ka commanded. The eldest high priest of the Seven Stones stood over Benu, his feathered headdress rising a full three feet above his wrinkled brow. He was lathered in white paint from head to toe, prepared for the ritual sacrifices that were soon to come.

“The spirits know you acted with honor, Benu. This is not your fault,” another high priest said. In total, five of the Seven Stones’ eldest leaders had crowded into the hut. Benu had sought them out immediately after he had returned to his village, recounting the heinous events he had witnessed.

Benu nodded in agreement, but the anger lingered within him. He felt soiled, and he wondered if the spirits truly understood that he had tried—with all his strength—to stop the heretic.

“Come.” Guwate’ka turned toward the hut’s exit.

Outside, a bonfire roared at the center of the village. Witch doctors swayed at the inferno’s edge, stomping their feet in time to steady drumbeats and a haunting, rhythmic chant voiced by a crowd of watching villagers. Elsewhere, torches flitted among scattered huts like bloated fireflies, carried by men and women who were readying empty bloodstained jugs for the night’s offerings.

Benu noted the witch doctors who had returned and those who had not. In addition to the rest of his ill-fated war party, ten of the clan’s warriors were missing. He imagined them in the villages of the Five Hills and the Clouded Valley, being smeared in ritual oils and prepared for their journey to Mbwiru Eikura just as his own clan’s tributes were.

The entire village entered into a song of respect and admiration as ceremonial attendants led the first captive to the bonfire. Guwate’ka approached the tribute, an ornate metal dagger clutched in the high priest’s hand.

“We celebrate you!” the high priest bellowed. “We give you to the greater tribe, where all umbaru are one people. In the hours to follow, we will sing in honor of your sacrifice, for it is great.”

“And when you too arrive in the Unformed Land, I will be there to greet you,” the tribute calmly stated.

Guwate’ka’s arm sliced in a lateral motion, cutting the witch doctor’s neck with practiced care. The tribute did not scream or twist in agony. He died with honor as he should have. What was the pain of this world compared to the

glorious eternity that awaited him in the realm beyond?

The high priest tipped his head skyward and outstretched his arms, his body trembling violently. Before long, a breathtaking azure aura formed around him and illuminated his features.

Benu watched as the elder entered the Ghost Trance, a state of mind that allowed some umbaru to look upon Mbwiru Eikura. The young witch doctor knew the ritual well. Like all of his calling, he had been born tethered to the Unformed Land. His connection was stronger than most, but it paled in comparison to that of the high priests. In the other world, Benu saw only impressions. The leaders of his clan were said to commune with the spirits directly, gleaning insight and commands.

Ceremonial attendants rushed forward to collect the tribute's blood in earthenware. His body was eviscerated, and his organs were carefully—even lovingly—removed and placed in jars.

Guwate'ka emerged from the trance shortly thereafter. He gazed out over the breathless villagers with unfocused eyes as if he had to reacclimate himself to the physical world. Time in the Unformed Land, Benu had learned, was different than it was here. A trance could last for minutes in the realm beyond, while only seconds would pass in this world.

"This tribute has reached Mbwiru Eikura, and he sings his song of thanks!" Guwate'ka announced.

The villagers clapped their hands in jubilation. Tears streamed down some of their faces.

It was midnight when the last of the tributes had been liberated. The villagers shuffled off to long wooden huts to feast and talk of the witch doctors whose lives had been given. The celebration would continue into the morning. Benu lingered by the fire as his kin dispersed.

Something troubled him, a distant unease. Although hours had passed since his encounter with Zuwadza's pupil, still the fool's voice echoed unwanted in his head.

*Look in places unseen. Ask questions unanswered.*

Benu clenched his fists. It was not the rival witch doctor's words that bothered him; it was the thought that he had been cursed by the heretic, despite the assurances of the high priests.

The young witch doctor wandered to the edge of the village, far from the chatter and the chorus of songs thrumming from the feasting huts. For those

of Benu's station, entering the Ghost Trance following the Igani was prohibited. The high priests said it disoriented the souls of the recently sacrificed tributes. But Benu wanted—*he needed*—to know his standing with the spirits.

He willed his spirit to detach from his flesh. Warm milky tears raced down his cheeks. With each drop, the world around him faded away, revealing the formless topography of Mbwiru Eikura. Energy blazed across the sky, although it did not illuminate the shifting land below.

"Do I remain in your favor?" he called out.

In reply, a dozen figures with chalky white eyes and bodies of pure darkness appeared before him. Their features were indiscernible, but due to Benu's rare connection with the Unformed Land, he recognized their identities. They were the spirits of the sacrificed tributes, the men and women who, according to Guwate'ka, had entered Mbwiru Eikura filled with peace.

Except they were anything but serene. The specters reached their shadowy arms toward Benu.

Although he could not hear their words, their confusion pierced his soul like spears. The Unformed Land was not what the apparitions had expected it to be. They writhed in uncertainty. It was as if their whole worldview had shattered.

It was as if everything they had ever believed was a lie.

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"To live is to sacrifice. To sacrifice is to live," Benu whispered into the humid air as painted bodies shifted around him. The Igani Bawe had come again, earlier than expected, and the Seven Stones villagers were busy preparing for the war, which would begin at sunrise. The battles usually followed the change of seasons, but only a week had passed since the last Igani.

Benu sat with his back to the bonfire at the center of the village, pondering recent events and watching the shadow of his lean frame thrash as the flames clawed at the sky. Guwate'ka and the other high priests claimed that the spirits demanded the war in response to the actions of the heretic Five Hills witch doctor. Despite Benu's silence on the matter, word of Zuwadza and his wayward pupil had spread from the Five Hills like wildfire via the trade routes that existed among the umbaru in times of peace. It was said that the heretic

had even slaughtered his own kin when they found him in the jungle. In the end, he and his master had disappeared into the wilds and had not been heard from since.

Rumors followed the stories. Some described the errant witch doctor as a madman who had massacred the Seven Stones warriors out of sheer bloodlust. Others told of the heretic eating the flesh of slain witch doctors and becoming a cannibal—a *kareeb*. Such an act was unthinkable, for those who committed it were denied entrance to Mbwiru Eikura. Benu dismissed these tales for the meaningless and unfounded gossip that they were.

“In this Igani, we will purify what has been tainted!” Guwate’ka bellowed from his place near the fire, ringed by the clan’s other high priests. “We will assure the spirits that we remain faithful!”

The villagers around Benu roared their approval, but he remained silent. Gone was his pride in the Igani. Gone was the clarity of self and purpose that the ritual had once offered him. There was only doubt now, a heavy, gnawing unease that sat in the pit of his stomach. Even here, surrounded by his kin, graced with the songs of his people, he could not help but think of the confused spirits he had seen in the Ghost Trance. The memory of them haunted him in waking and in dreams.

Had it all been a figment of his imagination, or was it real? He felt torn between the urge to have faith in the high priests’ words and the growing desire to question what they had said.

Benu closed his eyes and shook his head in disgust. *What is this sickness in me? The spirits of Mbwiru Eikura are not upset. Why now, after a lifetime of clarity, do I question the ways of my people?*

The young witch doctor turned toward the fire in time to watch Guwate’ka enter the Ghost Trance, azure light glowing across his features. Benu rose and joined in the dancing at the fire’s edge, telling himself that everything he had seen was merely the remnant of a curse placed on him. The high priests were infallible. Their connection with Mbwiru Eikura was beyond Benu’s comprehension.

Glistening with sweat, Benu gave himself to the song and dance. His worries faded. For a brief moment the ritual rekindled his pride, and he felt the longing for tomorrow’s honorable combat.

Movement flashed at the corner of his eye, shifting among the shadows near the fire. What resembled dozens of dark spectral hands reached out toward

him, grasping and clawing.

*The spirits . . . come to take revenge for the lies they were told*, Benu thought as he stumbled back, wild and anxious. When he looked at the fire again, however, he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

*My mind is playing tricks on me*, he tried to convince himself, but he could not shake off his unease. The world pressed in on him, the bodies, paint, and feathers blending into a suffocating sea of color and sound.

Benu staggered away from the fire and walked among the empty huts, gasping for breath. A cold hand shot out from the darkness and clasped his shoulder. With the speed of a corpse spider's strike, he turned, unsure of what awaited him. There, bathed in shadow save for her face, stood a woman. A beautiful woman.

"Benu," she said. "Strange that you avoid the ritual on this glorious night."

"Who are you?" he offered, his voice recovering from the startle.

"I am Adiya, wife of Guwate'ka."

Benu lowered his eyes out of respect. He was unworthy to look upon the wife of a high priest. Those of her revered position rarely left their huts, even in ceremony.

Adiya cupped her hand below Benu's chin, raising it until their eyes met. "You have my permission to look. I have come to see if the spirits spoke truly about you . . ."

"What—" Benu began, but Adiya gently pressed her fingers on his mouth, silencing him.

"They say something troubles you. An illness of sorts. I see it too."

Benu looked away, distraught that one of his kin knew of the confusion that plagued him.

"Be not ashamed. You are in good company here. The high priests believe me to be a healer. This poison that lingers in your mind can be purged," she said.

"And you would heal *me*?"

"I would," she assured him with an indefinable, loving energy. Adiya caressed Benu's arm with her hand and then grabbed his wet palm.

"Come."

Benu obliged, enticed by the woman's confidence. Once the lit forms of the village had become no more than untouchable stars in the distance, Adiya stopped, beckoning for the young witch doctor to kneel upon a woven mat.

There spread out before him were the tools of his trade: his body paint; his bejeweled dagger; his fearsome horned mask, adorned in feathers and wrought in the visage of an inhuman scowl; and an assortment of potions and talismans.

Adiya appeared only slightly older than Benu. She was alluring, strong yet with softness along her defined hips. Her sun-kissed face was rich in color like the bark of a healthy baree tree. The wind pulled at wild plumage attached to metal cuffs at her wrists and ankles.

"The paint," she said, scooping up a handful of the grainy paste, "from the marrow of the most fearsome jungle beasts. May it instill courage in you when you face your enemies." Adiya smeared the cool mixture over Benu's face.

"A claw dagger, lethal as the behemoth that shed it. Carefully and precisely will you guide its hungry edge." The woman slung Benu's weapon at his side.

The witch doctor froze as Adiya suddenly leaned forward. Her lips pressed against his before he could turn away. "A kiss, to show we are as one in this," she added afterward.

"A mask, bled from the nightmares of our forefathers," Adiya continued as she lifted the wooden visage and placed it on Benu, "to ward off the spirits that conspire against our good hunting."

Adiya stared intently at him. "Honor is more than a hollow death in battle."

Benu's eye twitched at the implication. "There is no hollow death in the Igani."

"Is that what you believe, or is that what you have been taught?" Adiya asked. "The spirits say you walk two paths and waver between destinies. One side, forever a child of the Seven Stones, seeking a grace the high priests can never give. The other, a wildfire, unforgiving and bright, bringing newness and life to these stagnant jungles. Tomorrow, you will be made to choose."

Her words bordered on heresy, but Benu could not ignore the fact that, in some small way, they reflected his recent inner turmoil. "Which is correct?" he asked. "What is the gain to be had by either?"

"To provide those answers is not my place. I only advise. But know this: the spirits are uneasy. They say we umbaru are no longer unique or worth celebrating. They say we lie to ourselves when we claim that our sacrifices are for the whole of our people. They say—" Adiya hesitated. "No. It is not my place. I am not a high priest."

"Speak. I will not judge." Benu teetered on the balls of his feet, enraptured.

Adiya whispered, barely audible, "They say we are *blind*."

Benu's pulse raced as memories of the heretic witch doctor flashed through his mind.

"The high priests act as if they speak to the spirits daily, but it is not so," Adiya continued. "Often, Guwate'ka and those of his station only glimpse the Unformed Land in passing. The Igani, the laws that rule our lives, they are there for the high priests to control us, to suppress who we are."

"I am sworn to uphold our ways," Benu replied, but his voice lacked conviction.

"You have seen evidence in Mbwiru Eikura that things are not as the leaders say, yes?"

Benu swallowed, unsure how safe it was to divulge what he had witnessed. "I have seen many things in the Unformed Land. Some are true; some are mere interpretations. Such is the nature of that place."

Adiya looked into Benu's eyes, narrowing her own. Her mouth stretched wide in a smile, and then she clapped her hands together. "Yes, yes. You *have* seen something. The spirits spoke the truth."

Suddenly they heard voices close by, echoing off the hut walls. Two men were wandering through the outskirts of the village. Adiya crouched low, and Benu mirrored her. His skin prickled with fear at the thought of being caught not only with a high priest's wife, but also questioning the revered leaders' teachings. After a moment, the speakers passed by and continued on their way.

"I know the price of station," Adiya said. "I know the burden you bear as a witch doctor." Her brow knitted in anger. "It is unspoken slavery. I have come to you in the hopes of liberation, that you might change our ways."

Benu regarded the dagger at his side and the carved mask on his face. "I do not understand. Why do you help me prepare for the Igani if you believe the ancient ways are wrong?"

"To see the right path, you must first look upon the wrong. At sunrise, you will perform the harvest as you have been taught, but you will do so with eyes open. This is what the spirits foretold."

Adiya stepped back and peered at her work. "Before me is not a man, but a witch doctor. A warrior of Mbwiru Eikura. A champion, not a servant. Never forget this."

Benu rose, his mind wild with thoughts of radical change. The possibilities of what he might soon learn invigorated him. He had a *purpose*. It was the

most complete he had felt in days.

“Good hunting,” said Adiya.

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Hours later, the war parties of the Seven Stones had fanned out through the thickets and vines of their jungle home. Benu forged ahead alone, hoping that solitude would grant him clarity. He commanded a pair of gaunt, naked hounds. They were unearthly creatures, vicious and exact, born of carrion and old umbaru magic.

Each season, after the Igani, the emptied husks of tributes were carefully sewn together in the shapes of dogs, their bodies filled with herbal composts and dried leaves. A boiled skull of a beast was used as the head, attached just above a mane of feathers. With the blessing of the spirits, these zombified beings served as loyal minions at a witch doctor’s beck and call.

The high priests had gifted two to Benu before his first Igani, but he had not used them. Pride had made him face that ritual war armed with his wits and his strength alone. Now, he thought only of survival. He had named the dogs Chena (which meant *fever*) and Owaze (meaning *flight*). Through the dense and wild undergrowth, they wove flawlessly in tandem, racing to the beat of phantom hearts.

A laugh, high in pitch and haunting, exploded through the leaves from an unknown source. Chena and Owaze froze, anxiously throwing their glances in all directions. Skidding to a halt, Benu spun to find the origin of the sound. He clasped the dagger on his belt, hearing the familiar shrill as he drew it.

The voice cackled. In the jungle gloom, the shadows had a way of hiding things. Suddenly, a small pouch no bigger than a child’s palm fell from the canopy above. Benu instinctively edged away, for he knew to fear the thousand curses that could be contained within.

His dogs, however, did not. Darting for the object as though they were fighting for a fresh bone, they tore into the bag with their fangs, releasing a sickly green cloud of dust. The hounds stumbled as if disoriented from vertigo. As they struggled to catch their bearings, Benu could only watch and wonder what fate had befallen them.

The unseen voice screamed a quick incantation: “*Gowaia fen! Bo’ta!*” The hiss of a small-grained rattle accentuated the call. This shook Benu into



understanding. Together, the spell and the pouch were a sloppy attempt at mind control. It would have failed on Benu or any other able witch doctor, but the dogs were simple creatures, weak of will.

“Coward!” Benu yelled into the jungle.

Chena and Owaze growled with their fleshless mouths. They pounced, and with tooth and gnarled claw they swept at the exposed flesh between Benu’s ceremonial vestments.

Dodging their savagery, the witch doctor grabbed a skull attached to his belt, treated with incendiary oils and magic. He hurled the object at his servants, and it ignited on contact. The pained effigy of a man flared to life, engulfing its targets. The hungry flames enveloped the beasts, but they pressed on nonetheless, their corpse bodies unfeeling and undeterred.

Benu evaded their advance. He cast a melodic counter curse, forming motes of blue energy from his mouth that he tore away and threw at the hounds like ghostly rags. This proved ineffective against the unseen voice’s spell. Even if Benu could avoid the dogs, he knew that his enemy was preparing another attack.

To surrender would make everything as it should be, as the umbaru had practiced for thousands of years. But he could not comprehend yielding willingly.

*Life in this realm should not be given up so easily. There is no need for this sacrifice . . . this Igani*, the heretic had said. The words did not sound as dishonorable as they once had.

Benu strengthened his grip on his dagger, desperate to find an opening. As Chena and Owaze wailed with each step, the voice above them laughed, pleased with itself. Benu’s throat tightened. His chest heaved with labored breaths. He sliced with his dagger, cutting through Chena’s hide just as Owaze leapt toward him. The witch doctor dove to the ground, narrowly evading the assault. The hounds circled him, ready to strike.

Without warning, the emerald undergrowth behind Owaze broke, revealing a daughter of the Seven Stones. She was frightening to behold in her full feathered dress. Four gnarled horns rose from her mask, crowned by deep crimson plumage. The newcomer extended her palm before her lips, which were visible through a wedge cut in the bottom of her wooden guise. Then, with a long, guttural cough, she vomited a swarm of locusts that roiled into the trees above.

The hidden witch doctor screamed, and the hexed dogs slumped to the ground, their bodies still ablaze.

Within seconds the insects had found their target, stealing from him his camouflage and balance. A fall. A pained shout. A man's lifeless body upon the vine-covered floor. The many-toothed locusts, assured of their victory, scattered in a thousand directions like smoke.

Benu, although thankful for his life, could not help but feel guilty as he looked upon the corpse. His enemy's skin was swollen with welts, red boils that had formed after the hungry bites of the swarm.

"Do you see? Another umbaru killed without reason," the masked woman said. "Though we are not made for this shadow world, we must do what we can to survive it."

Benu recognized the voice immediately. "Adiya?" he replied, both shocked and horrorstruck. "You are not a witch doctor! Why are you here?"

"The spirits urged me to follow you, and it is good I obeyed." She cocked her head.

"The rules of the Igani forbid killing the witch doc—"

"Rules?" Adiya growled. "You talk of rules after everything you have seen? Mbwiru Eikura is not an earned thing; it awaits all umbaru. This you know. The high priests set these games in motion. The heretic from the Five Hills, he saw the truth. Why do you deny it?"

"I . . ." Benu began, but he had no argument to offer, at least not one that he truly believed. She was right. The *heretic* was right.

Overwhelmed by a flood of emotion, Benu embraced Adiya and her words. It was more than just desire; it was the thrill of disobeying the stringent laws of the high priests. As Chena's and Owaze's remains lit the small enclave, Benu removed Adiya's mask and gently traced her lips with his finger. Without caution he kissed her, then pulled back and said, "To show we are as one in this."

Adiya grinned knowingly. She closed her eyes to invite further indulgence, and Benu leaned in. When their lips met, he was surprised to hear shouts and howls as a band of masked tribesmen leapt out of the surrounding jungle. In the wonderment of their distraction, both members of the Seven Stones had failed to recognize the danger.

The enemy's death wail and the flares that were once Benu's loyal hounds had summoned the witch doctors of the Clouded Valley tribe.

Solemnity was all Benu could muster as his captors led him toward the encroaching dusk. Before them lay the home of the Clouded Valley. To his eyes, it looked exactly like the village of the Seven Stones. Thatch-roofed huts crowded around an open central area, where a bonfire raged. Bloodstained jugs sat nearby, yearning for the offerings that would soon fill them.

Benu did not celebrate *Te Wok Nu'cha*, for Adiya's desire for life had penetrated him deeply. Even now, her longing stare called him to defy his heritage and strike against his captors. Such an act was forbidden, unthinkable.

The takings for the Clouded Valley were a meager three heads: Benu, Adiya, and an elder witch doctor known as Edwasi. As the party neared the bonfire, it was welcomed by ceremonial attendants, and other villagers were chanting, beating drums, and dancing in observance of the ritual.

Stripped of their masks and weapons, the three were laid upon low tables within a grass-walled hut, then lathered in oils of citrus. The captives were smeared with a seeded ichor, an agent that would protect their bodies from the rot of death in the hours to come. At the far end of the room, the silver-haired Edwasi breathed deep to soothe his anxiety.

From the table next to Benu, Adiya stared at him with a look of helplessness, stretching her hand toward him. He suddenly felt ill.

Having completed their work, the attendants departed and opened the hut's door to a large, muscular man wielding a crescent jawbone sickle. Benu did not know his name, but his impressive headdress signaled that he was an elder high priest. At his back were the others of his caste, decorated in colorful feathers and clutching mojo dolls in their hands.

The lead high priest gestured with his chin and then stepped back, away from the hut. Two skirted men entered the room and gripped Edwasi's wrists. The elder witch doctor gave no resistance to his escorts as they led him outside and presented him before the high priest. Edwasi embraced his fate.

Through the hut's open doorway, Benu observed the ceremony as if he were seeing it for the first time. The participants went through the same actions that he had witnessed at Iganis throughout his life. Words were spoken. Edwasi's blood was spilled. Attendants collected his organs in jars as the other villagers continued their singing. The ritual and all its pageantry were as they had always been. But to the young witch doctor, they seemed devoid of any

substance.

“We umbaru hide our senseless violence with rousing melodies,” Adiya spat.

By now, Benu surmised, Edwasi’s vaporous spirit had retreated from this world. The young witch doctor thought suddenly of the confused phantoms he had seen in Mbwiru Eikura, shattered by the realization that things were not as they had been led to believe.

“A life cut short, for what?” Adiya hissed. “We need not follow his path. There is another way out.”

Benu’s heart raced. His mind whirled. “They are many, and we are two. What way is there?”

“We willingly offer umbaru flesh to the spirits, but we are forbidden to eat of this bounty. Have you ever questioned why?”

Benu reeled at the suggestion. “*Kareeb* are damned by the spirits!”

“More stories crafted by the high priests.” Adiya waved her hand in dismissal. “I have heard secrets in the company of my husband. He spoke of legends that say eating witch doctor flesh unlocks the forbidden path to godhood. Lies were created that the truth might never be discovered. But you, champion, are wise and would harness this power for your own. With it, you could reform our broken culture. No one could stop you.”

Benu stared at Adiya, her eyes commanding and sincere.

“As our killers draw near, meet them with defiance,” Adiya whispered. “Follow me, and the umbaru will flourish in an age of true enlightenment, not darkness.”

As expected, the skirted men returned, their arms and chests smattered with gore. They reached for Adiya’s wrists, but—unexpectedly—they were met with bestial wrath.

The woman jumped on the table and dove, catching one of the men by his head and turning it as she rode the momentum of her attack. A hollow snap revealed her success. Before the remaining escort could react, Adiya’s cold touch grasped the back of his neck, and she pushed his head down as her knee drove up into his nose. He fell to the floor, motionless.

Benu could not believe what had just happened, nor could he fathom the speed and precision at which the kills had been performed. Never had he seen or heard of such ferocity. Grabbing his hand, Adiya pulled the stunned witch doctor to a run as they burst forth from the hut’s doorway.

The Clouded Valley villagers were outraged. Pushing past the elder high

priest—who, despite being armed, could only look stupefied—Adiya lunged for the jars holding Edwasi's organs. One by one she pulled off the lids while the crowd backed away, cursing the woman's actions but unsure of what to do.

"See how pathetic and dependent on rules they are?" she asked. "Umbaru are so flawed. We kill and die not for honor, but for fear."

In a blue earthenware jug, Adiya found the prize she had been searching for: Edwasi's warm, still heart. Raising it in the air, she said, "Greater are we than the injustices we have weathered. Taste of this bounty, Benu. Kill the servant within you!"

The Clouded Valley members shouted from all sides, their momentary shock wearing off. Benu knew they would attack soon. Many of them were armed with daggers and spears.

Standing fearlessly among the seething mob, Adiya extended the heart toward Benu. This, he realized, was the moment she had spoken of. This was the promise of a new life, free from lies, free from senseless wars and the burdens of custom. He recalled everything he had seen: the tormented spirits in the Unformed Land, the heretic witch doctor who had rebelled against the old ways.

But that man had not been a *kareeb*, nor had he welcomed the fight. It was Benu who had attacked first, making the bloodshed inevitable. The heretic had defied the laws to spare his master—to save a life—not to become a god among men.

"With this you can remake the Teganze!" Adiya howled. "Never again will life be thrown away without meaning. Never again will lies poison the hearts of our people!"

Staring at the faces of the Clouded Valley villagers, Benu was filled with a profound sense of clarity. These people were wrong in their ways—that was clear—but they were not his enemies. He had no desire to fight them, for such was not the path of truth. He wished only to enlighten them.

"I cannot," Benu said.

"Filth!" Adiya cried. "Coward!" She crushed the heart in her hand. A violet light erupted from within Benu's companion, illuminating the gray sky and the simple grass huts around her. The woman's body contorted. Skin sloughed away from her legs in long glistening patches, revealing a dozen withered tentacles covered in hundreds of bile-rimmed mouths. Three horns sprouted from her head, and her face popped and stretched. In lieu of a jaw, a gaping

orifice formed just above her throat, slaving in anticipation of a meal. The woman named Adiya was no more.

*“Demon . . .”* Benu had heard of the creatures, evil that was born of the shadows and beyond understanding. Never had he seen one. He shuddered, remembering his earlier embraces with it.

Benu leapt backward as one of the creature’s tentacles whipped out in a low, sweeping arc. The appendage screamed through the air, slicing into the torsos of two nearby umbaru. As the other villagers turned and ran, the demon wailed, sending waves of energy rippling out from its body.

The barrage knocked Benu off his feet, and he slammed into a rock outcropping. His head swam from the trauma as he rolled to his side. A few villagers mustered a defense, firing darts or jabbing with ceremonial daggers. Adiya, unstoppable in her—its—true form, easily swatted the attacks away.

The villagers were going to die, Benu realized. *He* was going to die.

The young witch doctor sat down and closed his eyes, clearing his mind and willing himself into the Ghost Trance. He longed for the guidance of the spirits. If he was to die this day, he would meet his end knowing whether the enlightenment he had gained was real, or whether it was simply the cunning ploy of a demon.

In moments, the ethereal landscape of Mbwiru Eikura filled his vision. Dozens of spirits moved toward him. At the center of the gathering stood a solitary figure, its shadowy arm beckoning Benu. A thought formed in his mind—an impression.

*Come.*

Benu trembled in apprehension. No matter. For good or ill, there would be no more fear, no more doubt. He stepped toward the spirit.

*You are Benu, this I know. You walk with a demon at your side.*

*“I . . .”* Benu lowered his head in shame. *“I do. I believed it spoke the truth.”*

*In part, it did. The demon masked its lies with truth to lead you astray. What is right is this: the Unformed Land is not as the high priests teach. The one you call heretic knew this. That is why he defied law.*

Images swirled and flashed before Benu like smoke and lightning. He glimpsed the so-called heretic wandering through strange lands the young witch doctor did not know. A falling star blazed in the night sky, and Benu followed it to where it crashed on the earth—a small town beset by evil.

*“If he knew, then why did he leave? Why did he not teach his kin?”*

*All umbaru walk their own paths. No two are the same. He will teach in his own way, and you will teach in another. You, Benu, straddle the world of shadow and the Unformed Land as if you were born at the border between them. It is this connection that will prove to be your greatest tool.*

“What is it that you wish me to teach?”

*Life in the shadow world is precious. It should not be wasted. The umbaru wars do not benefit the Unformed Land. Mbwiru Eikura is a land eternal, this is so. But there is sorrow as well as joy here, just as there is in your world. These are the truths you will teach.*

“This I saw when I gazed upon the spirits sacrificed during the Igani,” Benu replied.

*You saw, but you did not believe.*

Benu was speechless. The words were sharp and true.

*The demon sensed your doubt and was drawn to our sacred jungle.*

The phantom motioned over Benu’s shoulder. The witch doctor turned and saw—behind the veil separating Mbwiru Eikura from the world of shadow—the demon Adiya, frozen in time.

“To what purpose does it haunt me?”

The spirit raised its arm, conjuring new images. Benu saw himself eating of the heart. Despite Adiya’s claims, it did not grant him godlike powers. It did nothing. The spectral vision transformed again to show Benu cast out from the Seven Stones, left to wander the Teganze a *kareeb*, alone and destitute, consumed by sadness and shame. All the while, Adiya followed close by.

*It would have made you eat of the heart and abandon everything that you are. Only afterward would you have realized how grave a mistake you had made. In the years to come, the creature would have gorged on your tormented spirit, as it has countless others. But when tempted by the demon, you refused its offer. Why?*

“We umbaru are not weak or fearful, as the demon claimed. We follow the old ways out of honor and pride. Fighting those who hold tight to custom will accomplish nothing. I must *teach* them.”

This time, the thoughts came from all the figures as if they were communicating in unison.

*Yes. Blind you were, but no longer. Before us stands a teacher. A spiritual leader and a healer. A warrior who defends life but knows the necessity of death. Before us stands a witch doctor.*

“What of the demon?” Benu asked. Only the lead spirit replied.

*It was you who led it here. It is you who must drive it away. Great is that task, but remember always that the spirits are here to guide you. We are bound eternal to you by the Unformed Land.*

Benu bowed his head. “I thank you—”

Without warning, the Unformed Land disappeared in a stunning flash of light. Benu opened his eyes as if awakening from a dream, and he struggled to his feet.

The demon tore through the defending villagers. Waves of violet energy cascaded off its body, leveling huts and tossing umbaru into the air like mojo dolls. Adiya’s tentacles wrapped tight around necks, legs, and torsos. The bile-rimmed mouths devoured flesh and bone.

The witch doctor marched toward the creature, lifting an abandoned ceremonial blade and a spear from the ground. “Demon!” Benu roared. “Leave this place!” He hurled the spear, and it sailed high, barely nicking Adiya’s shoulder. But it was enough to draw the demon’s ire.

Adiya tossed aside the lifeless bodies held by her tentacles, and turned. The Clouded Valley defenders risked glances from behind the huts where they had taken cover. Just as Benu had hoped, they slowly trickled away, disappearing into the safety of the thick jungle.

Benu ran the blade across his open palm and then formed a tight fist, drawing more blood from the wound. “I am Benu of the Clan of the Seven Stones. In me flows the power of my people!”

“Your *people* abandoned you.” The demon’s otherworldly laugh echoed. “You are alone.”

“I am bound eternal to the Unformed Land. I am the living bridge to Mbwiru Eikura! At my side stand the spirits of the realm beyond. Always they guide me with their wisdom. And sometimes . . .”

The witch doctor opened his palm and cast the blood in front of the demon. Adiya sneered at the sudden act. The creature’s many mouths frothed with saliva at the scent of their next meal.

*“They aid me with their strength!”*

A pool of pale green energy erupted around Adiya. In an instant, a hundred unearthly arms rose, reaching through the veil separating this world from Mbwiru Eikura. The angered limbs grasped and clawed at the demon, robbing the creature of its flesh.



Before Adiya could be ripped apart, magic exploded from its body, dissolving the spirits' arms into wisps of jade-colored smoke. A tentacle coiled around Benu's neck and dragged him forward until his face was inches from the pulsating mouth on the demon's head. Its putrid breath washed over him.

Benu thrashed as the tentacle's maws began chewing at his neck. The mouths tore deep, devouring whatever flesh and blood they touched. The witch doctor's hands went limp from the pain, and he was dimly aware of the dagger slipping slowly through his fingers. Mustering the last reserves of his strength, he tightened his grip. Benu kicked hard against the demon's chest, and the creature briefly recoiled . . . enough for the young umbaru to find his opening.

He thrust the dagger into his enemy's brow, pushing the blade through the back of the demon's head. A look of disbelief flashed across its inhuman eyes before its body shuddered like a baree tree caught in a violent wind. Tentacles flailed in the air, hurling Benu aside.

The thing called Adiya withered and crumpled to the earth, lifeless.

The world around Benu seemed to slow as he lay on his back, blood cascading from his neck. Trees at the village's edge swayed with a light breeze. The calls of birds and beasts echoed from the wilds. The sun disappeared below the horizon, signaling an end to another Igani.

Death took him shortly afterward. Initially, he struggled against it, confused that fate had led him here and afraid that nothing he had learned would reach the ears of his kin. But just before his heart beat for the last time, he remembered the words of the spirits . . .

*You, Benu, straddle the world of shadow and the Unformed Land as if you were born at the border between them. It is this connection that will prove to be your greatest tool.*

. . . and was at peace.

. . .

The witch doctors of the Seven Stones clan settled by the bonfire, preparing for the Ghost Trance. Less than a week had passed since the last Igani. All of them had heard the tale of Benu and his fight against the demon. If the stories were true, he had sacrificed himself to spare the Tribe of the Clouded Valley.

But rumors followed the stories, as they always did. Such was the way of

things. There was talk from the Clouded Valley that Benu had defied the laws of Igani, that he had even been a *kareeb*.

The high priests of the Seven Stones spoke of the spirits' anger over these events. Although they deemed Benu a hero, they claimed that the presence of the demon had sullied the ritual war.

And so another Igani Bawe had been commanded.

Seeking the blessings of the spirits, the Seven Stones witch doctors entered the Ghost Trance. Time slowed as they shifted into the realm beyond. The village peeled away, and the twisting energies of the Unformed Land stretched out endlessly in all directions.

Normally, the warriors would each see and hear different spirits, if they saw or heard anything at all. This time, however, every witch doctor witnessed the same pitch-black figure beckoning them. The spirit's thoughts formed as words in their minds, clear as crystals and sharp as daggers.

*You are blind.*

The witch doctors were unsure of what to make of the spirit's accusation. They apologized and asked for forgiveness. Many of them broke off from the trance, fearful that they had somehow angered the spirits.

Those warriors were not ready, but others were.

"What is it you wish for us to see?" the few lingering witch doctors asked.

*Truth. You might die in this Igani. For what reason?*

"To honor you and your kin," one replied.

"The high priests command it. Such is my duty as a witch doctor," said another.

"To live is to sacrifice. To sacrifice is to live," a young warrior stated.

The spirit approached the last speaker, pondering those words. Once, in the other world, he had worn them as armor and wielded them as a blade. But lives should not be given up so easily, so needlessly.

*I do not want your sacrifice. This land does not need it.*

Confusion and unease rippled off the young witch doctor. He hesitated before speaking. "Then what do you ask of me? What is there besides sacrifice?"

*Life.*

In the end, only the young warrior had remained in the trance, but the spirit once named Benu harbored no ill will toward those who had fled. If it took days, weeks, or even years, he would guide them to enlightenment. All

umbaru walked their own paths to truth. No two were the same.





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# Theatre Macabre: The Dark Exile

*James Waugh*

“You will confess what you have done, or it will be beaten out of you!” the constable insisted, smashing his fist into the prisoner’s jaw.

The cell was a dank chamber with cobblestone floors and rife with the sour scent of death. A thick, almost tangible dark consumed what little space was contained within its walls. The only light was from a sliver slicing its way through the tiny barred window, casting an eerie amber luminescence over the broken man chained by manacles to one of the two chairs that surrounded a meek wooden table.

“Now, now, Constable . . . We don’t need violence. I must hear the entire tale. For all we know, this man is addled by the demonic influence he asserts.” The Zakarum priest had seemed to cling to the shadowed corners since he had entered the cell, his hooded visage cocking to the side, studying the prisoner, watching his every gesture.

“Oh, curses to that. This man ’ere should be hanging from them gallows.”

“What you believe is of little consequence to me . . . You have your instructions.”

“Aye, priest, if the magistrate says I must listen to you, I shall. But take no pity on this fiend. He’s a liar. Lies are how he makes his livin’, even.”

“You must understand,” the prisoner desperately broke in, “there is a bleakness shrouding it all. Some sinister manipulation behind every turn that has preyed on my . . . my weakness . . . You must know this. You must know what I have been forced to see!”

The constable raised his fist to deliver another blow. “If I wanted your back talk, I’d—”

“Constable Rantz! Please, let the man speak.” The priest lumbered slightly forward, his cloak now kissed by the sunlight. “Come, now, Samuel Drest, if I am to ascertain whether there was maleficent influence to your crime, I must hear all of it . . . from the top, as they say in your profession . . .”

Drest was sweaty, his chest heaving, his breath exasperated. He shot a coy glance upward, then back down, the hunger of his addiction yearning to be

satiated. "Is it possible . . . I am asking . . . It would help if . . . if I could first have a bit of the . . . a smoke of the pipe. It would help me . . . concentrate."

Rantz's knuckles hit Drest's face as fast as a cracked whip. The prisoner screamed and the blood started to flow, trickling from the fresh rip above his eye.

"You criminal . . . you are incarcerated! How dare you ask such a question?!"

"I'm just . . . I'm sick, is all, sir. I feel like I need to spit up."

"You will get no cure from me," Rantz said, sitting in the empty chair across from Drest.

"Tell your tale, playwright. Let the burden you've carried leave you. Let that alleviation be the salve for your ails." The priest's voice was leveled and calm, cold, even.

Drest bobbed his head forward, leaning what he could of his weight on the tiny table, drearily accepting his fate. It had come to this. Since he'd seen the abyss, become part of its plan, he had always known it would. He took a deep breath and tried to focus, tried to find the eloquence he was known for, the eloquence that had once made him a talent so many heralded.

"It's tragedy of the purest form, you see. A great man falling from grace by his one fatal flaw . . . just as the Skovos masters teach. There was me, and there was Marlowe . . . Marlowe, with his raven-dark hair and piercing green eyes that all the ladies said looked like tiny emeralds. Marlowe the golden boy. The savant. The fraud. I remember when he first showed up at the Grand Desote . . . my playhouse, not his. It was during a rehearsal of my play *The Broken Four*. I was on top of the world then, a playwright whose work had finally found purchase. Whose creations no longer lingered in the bowels of the cursed brain of a starving writer, but lived in the minds of an adoring, needing audience . . ."

"What is this poetic drivel? Your feud with Marlowe is well known. I'm no newcomer to Westmarch . . . Get to the point already."

"Constable . . ." The priest's words were a guttural rumble. "I said I had to hear it all, and so I shall. Roots of demonic influence can be traced back many years. All is relevant."

A scoundrel's smile creased the side of Drest's mouth. It was a small, meaningless victory.

"The day Marlowe walked into the Desote, holding his bloated, derivative

manuscript in those skeletally long fingers of his, was the day my life changed forever. It was the day I truly understood the word *nemesis*. It was the moment that taught me the true meaning of desire . . . desire to be better than another. Desire to see my fame grow, if only to spite his.

“You see, it was a matter of months before his silver tongue tweaked the ears of our patron, the lord Barimos, and his play—oh, his play, such cliché, such redundancy, such trash—disgraced the stage. My stage. I recall sitting in the back of the crowd during its first performance, my mouth slack with embarrassment and shock, watching how . . . how . . . juvenile it seemed, how trite. But then a funny thing happened. Just as my mentor, the great Samus Aritos—who had come all the way from Skovos, a god of dramatic craft—once said, ‘You can never account for an audience’s taste.’ He was right. When it was over, that audience, those fools, stood up and cheered. Thunderous applause, a booming cacophony surrounding me. Screams of elation. And *he* stood, bowing before them like some false messiah who had forgotten he was only in a playhouse. *My* playhouse . . . This was a line in the sand for me. This would be rivalry as I had never experienced. I didn’t know what story my muse would give me next, what theme needed to be expressed through my eager quill. But I did know that it must be better than Marlowe’s drivel. It would have to run his works out of my theatre . . . Instead, Marlowe’s fame grew and grew.”

“At the expense of yours, of course.” There was a touch of snide humor in the constable’s tone.

“Correct, sir. Indeed. But not at first. You must give me more credit than that . . . The two of us dueled for the better of three years. His play and then one of mine gracing that old stage, our stories like two serpents locked in a death coil. I stopped going to his performances. I didn’t want to spare the time. They only enraged my soul. Instead, during them I would write feverishly into the night, thinking solely about how I would win my audience back, burning countless candles, and enduring cramped hands . . . With each show, what I wanted to say to mankind mattered less. It was as if the only reason to bring quill to vellum was to enjoy Marlowe’s jealousy, his ire, if one of my plays captivated the audience or gained a smile or praise from our lord Barimos. I yearned for Marlowe’s scowl . . . It meant more than anything. And to think I once thought I had insight to offer this realm.”

“Way you make it sound, people used to go to your plays, Drest. Last I heard before this *Dark Exile* number, you was washed up. Done for.”

Drest drew a deep breath. He felt the sweat breaking out on his forehead again, the throes of his addiction tugging at his every thought.

“Well, sir, you do have a point. At the height of our rivalry, a period when we couldn’t even be in the same room or at the same party without trading verbal—or, once or twice, very physical—jabs, a time when we both tried to convince actors not to work with the other, everything changed for Marlowe. My play *Rathma’s Curse* had been well received and was outselling Marlowe’s most recent folly. I can’t even tell you what that play of mine was about anymore. Isn’t that sad? All I remember is that they, the rabble we called our endearing audience, liked it more than what Marlowe had written.”

“And how does this bear the marks of demonic influence, Mr. Drest? How does this lead to what you have done?” The priest’s voice from the shade was a grating terror as he moved into the light once more, his pale elderly face barely peering from the cloak. There was something sickly about what Drest could see of him. His skin was ivory white, translucent, and dry; he was a man not far from the end.

“ ‘Bout time you came to your senses, priest. Can we get on with the hangin’ already?”

“Sir!” Drest shrieked. “This is all . . . all part of what . . . what makes the demonism so clear. Please, it . . . Marlowe took a sabbatical of sorts, three months off without a performance of his work. Three months where none saw or heard from the rat. I assumed it was a final surrender, an understanding by the hack that the Desote was truly my playhouse and his material would no longer be accepted there.”

“But that did not happen, did it?” the Zakarum said, shifting back into the dark.

“No, sir. When he finally returned, slithering into the middle of one of my rehearsals, he had reinvented himself as some sort of dark prophet of doom, a writer of horror who reveled in tales of demonic dominion over mankind. How could I have known what he had done? What he had truly become? He wore all black, with twisted silver rings and bizarre piercings as if he were some common pirate trader. He had become alabaster white, as if he no longer dwelled in the sunlight, and gaunt with hollow eyes tucked into inky circular nests. It was as though he had stepped off the stage of the new breed of grim theatre he was to write . . . plays we all thought were mere fantasies. Desperate attempts to gain fame.”



Drest began to laugh, consumed by the sheer madness of what he had done, all he had experienced. Now, telling it, he could see the grand irony, how the entire horrible scenario had been right there before him all this time. His laughter shook his body into a cough as he continued. "By the gods, I assumed it was just an act, Marlowe's masterstroke to use spectacle and shock to bring the crowd back to him. What a fool I was."

"If it was an act, it worked."

The laughter stopped. All levity was wiped from Drest's face. "Yes, Constable. It worked. This new Marlowe, touched by shadow, had become an 'irreverent genius,' or so he was suddenly called. His plays were sinister ruminations on man's insignificance in the world, and yet that audience, that dumb herd, saw them as red meat to indulge their own lascivious fantasies of violence and horror. They lined up around the block, down the muddy streets, in the rain to see his wanton exploitation. They called it 'theatre macabre,' a new genre to satiate the hungered mob. Seeing this, seeing them eat up such clear obscenity, I fell into a chasm of depression, utter sorrow at the simplemindedness of those that I labored so hard to please. I could no longer write. I'd sit with quill in hand, staring at the parchment, and nothing would come. My muse had . . . had abandoned me, embarrassed by the lack of appreciation for the good in our art. And so I turned to the pipe, hoping in that transcendent state I'd find some fit of inspiration, some lightning bolt of creativity. But none came."

"This seems like a fairly open-and-shut case to me, priest. Jealousy bein' the motive an' all."

"Jealousy did not . . . did not drive my hand, sir."

"Tell it, then." The Zakarum's words were chilling as he moved slowly toward the window, gazing out into the light, yet Drest still could not see the face of the man that was judging his fate.

"I had not written a play in almost a year, and not from a dearth of trying. You see, it was as if my mind would fall into a blank any time I'd make an attempt. Not even the burning desire to do better work than Marlowe brought words to page anymore. It was beyond sorrow. It was black magic."

"Black magic? 'Ere, now, are you going to try to suggest that your sloth is because of some spell?"

"That is correct, Constable. It is true. I did not know it then. But now, now having touched it, now I know what Marlowe had done. His rituals and his

tainted grimoires gave him illumination to the darkness . . . and I was his victim. I will get there in time. Patience is key.”

“I have little of that.”

“Little is needed, Constable. One day my patron, Lord Barimos, showed at my door at the first rooster caw of morn. I had been at the Ram’s Den the night before, and my appearance was—”

“The disheveled look of a pipe fiend . . . The way you look now, you mean?”

“Yes, Constable . . . yes. Barimos had his new prize. He had Marlowe, and I had produced nothing. Barimos, having spent good gold to keep my quill creating characters, wanted to see what I was endeavoring upon next. He demanded pages in hand, dialog to read, a story. A muted gray light had just begun to erode the night, and I could taste the stale sweetness of the night before’s wine on the roof of my mouth. I could still feel the haze of the pipe’s magic clouding my mind. Barimos knew. He had worked with pained artists long enough to accept the peculiarities of our kind and was always amenable—even enabling, so to speak—as long as we stole fire from the High Heavens and wrote it into plays for the Desote. I immediately told him that I had been up all night, writing . . . that I was in the midst of my finest work. The piece that would bring me back to the top and make his patronage worth every bit of copper and gold he’d ever spent on me.

“Barimos is a hard man. It amazes me that he has a heart for the arts at all, with his callousness . . . His bushy eyebrows knitted together. He took a deep inhalation of me. He smelled pipe and spirit. He could see the abysmal state of my lodging, the desperate nest of a creator who has lost his will to produce. I assumed he’d send me packing at once. But, to my surprise, he offered up a very clear mandate, an alternative to vagrancy.

“ ‘Drest,’ the lord Barimos said in that baritone, gruff voice of his. ‘You’re a good wright. Or were. It’s the only reason you are not being thrown from this building, my building, this morning. It is the only reason I do not send you back to the cold of the harsh streets, begging and thieving as you were when I first found you . . . when I first read your plays. If you do not bring me a play in a week that I can put to stage, I have no more need of you.’

“ ‘I will, sir,’ I said, grabbing his hand and shaking it hard. ‘I will give you the finest play you have yet to read, my lord.’

“ ‘Funny . . . Marlowe said the same thing just yesterday. We shall see who between you hands in the better work. If you cannot compete, then back to the

street go you!’ Barimos responded.

“I could not know whether what he said was true, whether it was a ruse to inspire the old competition. But at the time, sick from need of more smoke, I believed that he was speaking the truth. So where did I go with this golden opportunity from my patron and lord? Back to the den. Seeking inspiration. Seeking my muse.”

“The Ram’s Den? That filthy opium armpit?”

“One and the same, Constable. Funny; I find it quite charming . . . A smoke den in the day is a bastion of sorrow. The Ram’s Den in the daylight hours is triply so. A horror house to sickly amputees; malnourished children; exotic cutthroats; soldiers who cannot escape the sufferings of the wars they fought; mad, end-of-the-world, raving vagabonds who call themselves prophets, prophets with no followers; and those like me, life’s failures. Most of them smoking away reality. All lost in the dark sanctuary, the only salvation from the mirror that the sun creates—the reflection of the real world, the one that mocks them at every turn and reminds them of their station. I feel at home there or places like it. Always have. No one looks at you in a smoke den. You find a corner you make your very own. You push aside the spiders or any other vermin . . . and you lose yourself and the world. Or at least that’s how it should go. But it did not this day.

“I had found my usual spot in the back, brushed off the rat feces, and prepared my pipe. But I had a feeling, a sense, that I was being watched, eyes burrowing into me like pins under the flesh. That’s when the horrid man, the monster who led me into this abyss, approached. His pale face was abhorrent, old, and one eye was milk white, staring into me. It was a face forged in the Hells themselves, burnt by winter’s snow. He said nothing, just glared . . . that eye, that chalky pudding eye, searching.

“ ‘Get away from me!’ I said to him. When no response came, I kicked at him hard in the shin. But he reacted not. Finally he opened his beak. Foul stench wafted out. You’d swear it was demon’s breath, and maybe it was. But what he told me . . . what he told me was true.

“ ‘Marlowe has put an incantation on you. That is why your muse no longer visits.’ His voice was a raspy exhalation. I jumped back into the wall. His tone was like death itself whispering to me.”

“Black magic this is,” the Zakarum chimed in, very matter of fact.

“Come off it . . . More like black lies.”

“What I tell you is what happened. My reaction at first was similar to yours, Constable. But his icy gaze told me to assuage my doubt in him.

“He went on. ‘Marlowe is a minion of the dark. This evil has inspired his quill and must be cast out. ’Twas a year ago that he made his pact with the Hells, and ’twas a year ago that your suffering began. You must stop him.’ I could not be certain that I wasn’t hallucinating. Through the course of the panic I had endured over the last few months and the smoke I had consumed, perhaps I had lost all points of sanity left . . . But what he said was true.

“‘Go now,’ the stranger continued. ‘Go, and be swift about it. Marlowe does a ritual this moment. I can feel it. You can stop him. Stop his madness before it progresses, and save yourself. Go and see, if you doubt me. It is evil that showed him his path, Mr. Samuel. His dark rites have made him talented and you unable to create.’

“I had to know. I had barely slept. I could feel the smoke seeping in as the man walked off and I inhaled. I had nothing left. I grasped at this madness. There was truth to it; I just had no idea how much. Marlowe had moved to an upscale tenement near the Desote, a trophy from his series of successful plays and my failure. I crept around the back slowly. Travelers wandered by, eyeing me, suspicious. Or so it felt in my paranoid state. Some were armed: foreign adventurers, of course. Their ilk is always prevalent. You never see them twice. Most don’t last long . . . The others were the usual rabble, the shop keeps hurrying on to a life I could never understand—a life of redundancy. Finally, around back I could peer into Marlowe’s home. The glass was smudged, but a warm candlelight flickered, allowing me to catch glimpses of what was inside. I gently pushed the window up. A loud creak sent my heart into my throat and a cat meowing bloody murder down the alley. I pulled myself in.”

“So you’re a burglar too, eh?” Rantz said, leaning in closer, looking Drest dead in the eye. “Playwrights are all such riffraff, really. Somehow you clawed your way into decent society; don’t mean it changes who you truly are.”

“I never suggested I was a paragon, sir. What was inside . . . what was inside would turn even the brightest of heroes into madness. The first thing I noticed was a foul odor. Tangible. Like rot and curdled milk. Then I saw a sight that was beyond macabre.”

“More macabre than the horror we found in your place?” Rantz asked. “That would be a real feat.”

“You have no idea!” Drest’s mood had shifted back to darkness. It was as if

all light within him had been snuffed out, consumed by the memory of what he had seen. "There were puddles of burnt-out candles tracing the edges of strange sigils—evidence of the dark rites the man had spoken to me of. Skulls filled a practically unfurnished home. Bones. Bowls of blood. In the middle of the room, I saw where that stench had come from. Bloody, rotting entrails—could have been a calf's, may have been human—covered in hungry flies. It smelled as if they had been left out for weeks. The stench sent me coughing . . . holding back the gurgling vomit boiling up."

"With what we saw at your place . . . I very much doubt that."

"But near those blasted entrails . . . near that sickness . . . was a manuscript."

"A what?" the Zakarum boomed.

"A manuscript . . . *the* manuscript, that is. Next to it was a bowl . . . where the blood from those entrails had been drained, coagulated into a thick, muddy paste of red."

"What do you mean '*the* manuscript'?" the priest pressed.

"*The . . . The Dark Exile, Part One*. It . . . it was Marlowe's."

"So then *The Dark Exile*, 'your' masterpiece, was actually Marlowe's work?" The constable almost burst out laughing.

"Yes."

"You're a plagiarist as well as—"

"Tell us of the play. The manuscript!" the Zakarum interrupted.

"No . . . not that," Rantz insisted. "Wait. Wait one bloody second. I don't want to hear about this play. I want to know how Mr. Marlowe's dead, rotting body ended up in your floorboards, nothing more than a bloated, foul husk, a rancid sack of meat that had decomposed for months. How did that get in your domicile? To the point, man!"

"I . . . I . . ."

"You sick monster. Tell me why the decayed body of your rival playwright has been in your floorboards for months. You lived with it . . . in your own home! Tell us how you murdered Marlowe!"

"It . . . I . . . I did not want to. Don't you see this is . . . ? There is more to it all. A design. A plan. I took the manuscript. This must have been what Barimos was talking about, Marlowe's masterpiece. Marlowe wasn't there, and so I went home, stumbling through the daylight, through a day that felt colder by the moment. My heart was racing, throbbing against my ribs as I entered my residence. I held the manuscript in my arms like a cradled child. Holding it

tight. Locking my doors, I began to read. The pages were stained by blood . . . but the text was crisp, written clear, in a script I would swear was not Marlowe's own. And the words . . . oh, the characters and words. This was *The Dark Exile*. This was the play that would bring me back."

"Marlowe's play, ya mean."

"Hardly!" Drest snapped, his tone instantly sardonic. "A play given to him by some malefic master. Channeled through him, I know now. For what purpose, I cannot say. But the words . . . This dark brilliance was the most horrific thing I had ever read . . . and the most inspired."

"Tell me of it," the priest demanded.

"It is the tale of a family . . . Lords of Hell all. Demons, monsters . . . gods, to mere mortals like us. Whatever these beings are, there is truth to them . . . These entities, they manipulate all we know. There are Prime Evils, a triumvirate of power. In the play they are Terror, Hatred, and Destruction. And there are Lesser Evils—Pain, Sin, Anguish, and Lies. The seven Evils are the worst of us incarnate, amplified, and they feed off of what we could become."

"Right. I heard these tales before. Ghost stories to scare lil' children."

"They are much more than that, Constable. In the play there is upheaval amongst the demons' ranks. Evil begins to turn upon itself. The Lessers are tired of their servitude. You see, with the ascension of man and the subsequent standstill of a cosmic war called the Eternal Conflict, the three Primes began to devote their energies to the perversion of mortal souls—us. This causes the Lesser Evils to question the authority of the Three, bringing about a great rift between the Prime Evils and their servitors. Two of the Lesser Evils make a pact and seek to get the other two lords on their side. They conspire, plot, snivel . . . all while the Lord of Terror, known as Diablo, watches their petty maneuvering. I was in the middle of the play, unable to take my eyes from the page—the Lessers had organized and formulated their plan to rise against their brethren, overthrow them, and banish them from the Burning Hells, banish them to our world . . . to . . . to the world of men!—when I heard a thumping on my door. *Pounding*. Thud. Thud. Thud. Followed by furious screams: 'Open up, you bastard. Open it!'

"I knew who it was before I'd even looked. I could hear his nasal voice. I could hear the desperation in his tone. It was Marlowe. He had known somehow that I had taken his play, instinctively or maybe through his dark arts. I quickly covered the manuscript and opened the door. There was no

hiding. He knew I was inside. Any more shouting, and he would have aroused the interest of the entire city . . . And there he stood, dressed in his disheveled black garb, scowling at me, fire in his eyes.

“ ‘Give it to me, Drest.’ His words were an icy shiver. ‘Give it to me. You are dealing with a power you do not understand,’ he went on, pushing himself into the doorway and forcing me to back up. ‘I have made a grave error that I am trying to rectify. Do not make the same one.’

“He slammed the door closed behind him, and I slid to the wall, watching him. Watching the panic bring his body to shake. Watching as he stretched those long fingers toward me, frothing at the mouth, before he screamed again, ‘*Give it to me!* I have wronged you and myself. You have no idea of the horrors I have seen and those you will, too, if you do not give it now and help me end this!’ ”

The constable listened intently, leaning forward, waiting for the confirmation he had hoped for. The Zakarum stepped behind Rantz, a reaper of a shadow, waiting for the same revelation.

“It was delightful. I could not help but take joy in this moment, watching the complete unraveling of Marlowe . . . watching his failure. His knowing that I knew his success, his great achievements, his victories over me were not earned by talent greater than mine . . . but by other means. In this moment it hit him that I had won. I had finally won. I couldn’t help myself. I pulled the manuscript out, dangling it in front of him. ‘Is this what you want, Marlowe?’ I said.”

“And then . . .” the priest interjected eagerly.

“And then,” Drest continued, nearly lost in the reverie of the memory, sweat pouring down his face, soaking him, tremors from his sickness apparent but unable to rob the bliss of his thoughts, “he could no longer stand before my mockery. I hadn’t said a word more, but he could see the contentment chiseled over my expression, a mask of victory. He rushed at me, charging full bore, hands outstretched for my throat.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Constable Rantz said.

“He moved like lightning. Faster than I had expected. A madman possessed by will, one hand going for my throat, the other for the play! I was able to toss him to the side, my weight bearing down on him. His fist came across my brow, and my vision flashed red. I can’t describe what happened next. It was as if . . . it was as if I was overcome by some spirit of wrath . . . some being that

was not I. I . . . I was on top of him. Impossibly strong. His hands reached up, jagged fingers outstretched, trying hard to block my view. But they did not stop me from grabbing a candlestick from the post near my bedding and bringing it down hard into his head. Harder. Again. Again. Blood splashing my face, coloring my yellowed flesh a purplish hue. Again I hit him . . . until . . . until I could no longer tell that it was Marlowe. Until all that was before me was a splattered mush with ivory-white bone protruding out of gore.”

“Done, then! You admit to killing him. I didn’t hear nothing about no demons ’cept some old opium codger. Can we get to the hanging now, please?”

“Wait! No, sir. Listen . . . There is so much more. Please, let me finish.”

“I don’t want to hear any more of it! He’s a murderer, priest. He admitted it. Can we just be through with this?”

“No,” the priest said with finality. With a cautious gesture, he bade Drest to continue.

Drest was exhausted. Retelling his act was visceral. It resonated deep within him.

“Go on, then, playwright,” Rantz said, kicking his prisoner’s feet.

“I . . . You do not know how sick I feel, sir. I . . . I really need a—”

“You will get none of it. Now, continue.”

“I couldn’t believe what I had done. It was not me. You must see that. I am gentle in nature. An artist, a lover of beauty, of the senses. This act was . . . it was beyond me. I had become my baser instincts. I was consumed by them.”

“You’re just a man. It’s what men do. No need for the romance of it. Nothing scarier than man in this world, let me tell you that.” Rantz was tired of this process. He had a confession. What more did he need? The rest was showmanship to keep the Zakarum priest, Malchus, happy.

“The foul stench of the beaten and bashed body clogged my nose. I was exhausted. And so, I did the only thing I could. The only thing that made sense to me. I finished reading the play.”

“Tell of it,” the priest pressed.

“I did not realize I had such a fan of my work in you, priest.”

“Fan of Marlowe’s work, maybe,” Rantz quipped.

“A classic tale of greed and treachery ensues. Together the Lesser Evils strike at the Primes in a conflict that is poised to destroy a third of the Hells. An uprising, a war in the Hells! It does not get more dramatic. The second act builds to a monumental crescendo as Azmodan and Belial—the Lord of Sin



and the Lord of Lies, respectively—gather Duriel and Andariel to discuss a coup. The two instigators believe that the Primes' choices have been foolish and that the Lessers know what is best. Duriel, the Lord of Pain, is skeptical. He asserts that this is a misguided attempt, that crossing the likes of Diablo, the Lord of Terror, is a fool's errand. But it soon becomes clear that if Duriel does not go along with the rest, it will be even more dangerous for him. As the story goes on, armies on both sides mount, and the Lessers, having conspired and prepared for war, get ready to execute their plan. With war about to begin, the play ends. A cliffhanger. The audience loves those. But more so, the theatre owners do. For it means, if done right, there will be another wave of ticket sales upon the conclusion. Given the audience's recent taste for darkness that Marlowe had cultivated with his witchcraft, I knew this production would be a glorious success. It was everything I needed to be back.

"Of course, I had one small obstacle: a dead nemesis. There was no way to take the body out of my lodging. In my berserker rage, I had made such a mess of Marlowe that there would be no confusion that he was a corpse, a murdered corpse . . . if people could even tell what was left was a man at all. And so . . . Marlowe, my old friend, would come to live with me. Together at last. Removing floorboards is not as easy as you'd think, Constable. But I stuffed his body below. Food for spiders, snakes, and the rats that would keep me up at night.

"The moment I was done putting my new lodger to bed, I changed clothes and ran straight to the Desote, holding on to the manuscript as if my life depended upon it arriving in pristine condition. Barimos loved it. He found its style reminiscent of Marlowe, yet he commended me on my ability to adapt to the new tastes of our audience. He was certain its blasphemy would alert the clergy—as I see it has—but always believed in the saying that controversy leads to copper.

"Yet the play . . . *The Dark Exile* was cursed from the start. In early rehearsals, two actors who had auditioned to be a Prime Evil fell victim to horrific accidents."

"Accidents happen, murderer."

"But two? Both men reading for the role of the Lord of Terror, Diablo? Geoffrey of Caldeum fell to a trap-door malfunction, dropping fifteen feet onto prop polearms. His body looked like a twisted pincushion. Vincent Didier—the pride of Westmarch, who many barmaids said was the fairest man in all the

world—died the following day. After auditioning for the Diablo role, Vincent, who had a penchant for whiskey, stumbled from the stage stairs and broke his neck. Wrenched it halfway around.”

“Seems like it happens to drunkards more and more these days.”

“But, Constable, a bad omen followed it. A murder of crows swooped from the rafters and immediately started picking at his face. His body was still warm. I had never seen such a thing before. No one had.

“Barimos almost wanted to shut down the production, as actors began to believe it was cursed. Furthermore, worry sparked up about the whereabouts of my dear colleague Marlowe. Nevertheless, the play was finally cast as a newcomer, Thomas Burns, a former understudy, took the role of Diablo, brazenly risking the curse for an opportunity at exposure. Actors will do anything for attention, anything for what they call a ‘break.’ They’ll even chance death . . . or, maybe worse, loss of personal pride.”

The Zakarum stepped from the dark forcibly and slammed his fist onto the table. “Tell me of the black influence! Do so now! I tire of this.”

“There ya go, priest. Yer comin’ to yer senses.”

“Y-Yes, sir.” There was something absolutely intimidating about the priest’s gesture, something so forceful in tone and certainty that Drest fumbled for a moment, trying desperately to collect his thoughts in the murky haze of his drug need. He could barely see the man’s face; he glimpsed just a pale flash of old white skin, the cleric slinking back into his hood and to the shaded corner. “I . . . It was the night of the show’s opening when it—he—started.”

“Who, murderer?”

“Marlowe. I was dressing in my best, a suit made by Samwise the flamboyant tailor, a fine silk tie with it. I was ready for my dramatic return. Then, from underneath the floorboards came a rattling! Followed by a BANG . . . BANG . . . BANG. My heart leaped in my chest! With thumping in my ears, I stood up, walking slowly toward the sound. BANG. Again and again. I could feel my hands shaking. I could feel the dreadful cold of fear washing over me. And then came the voice . . . a voice I knew so well. One that I had hated all these years.

“ ‘Dreeeeest,’ it said, the word drawn out, garbled as if the speaker’s windpipe was cracked. It was, of course. ‘Dreeeeest. You do not know what you are about to do.’ I could not believe what I was hearing. It was Marlowe’s voice coming from below.”

“You’re a lunatic!”

“It is truth, sir.”

“Go on.” The Zakarum’s cadence hinted at impatience.

“ ‘Dreeest,’ it called out again. At first I thought I was going insane, just as you say. I assumed this was because of all the smoke I had taken in. Then the floorboards right where I had buried him began to rattle and bang—bang, BANG!—as if the corpse inside was pushing against them. I crawled forward, looking down, shaking from terror the entire time.

“ ‘Stop it, Marlowe! Stop it!’ I yelled, sanity losing its grip on me. I could peer between the boards. The foul stench of his rotting corpse wafted up. I could see his graying skin, the rats scattering, squeaking. I could see his eye, crushed in, and what was left of his skull moving. He was . . . he was alive.

“ ‘Do not allow the play to shooow. You do nooot know what you will unleash, Dreeeest. You will have to do as I did for the rest. You will have to—’ I couldn’t take it anymore and started to bang hard on the floorboards, sending the rats beneath squealing.

“ ‘SHUT UP! Shut up! You are not real. You are not real!’ I ran from my hovel. I ran as fast as I could, going to my opening a shaken man.”

“You are saying Marlowe spoke to you from the dead?”

“I am. Many times, as you will hear.”

“And I am saying you are a lunatic!”

“No, Constable. There is evil and darkness surrounding all of us. Darkness that I wish I didn’t know. But the night of the opening was not a dark one for me. Instead of listening to the advice from the dead, I watched the theatre fill. I watched Barimos bring his bevy of exotic women from Lut Gholein to the front row, showing off his status as he’s prone to do. It was a full house. As the play began, I watched the audience, not the stage. It is what I always have done. I know what’s on the stage, but what’s in those seats is new every time. But what I saw I never had seen before. Men and women riveted, hands clutching the wooden chairs hard. Gasps, shock. Yet none turned an eye. Women looked as if they were going to faint. Fear found home in the hardest of the men.”

“Marlowe did good work, then, eh?”

“Constable, this work was not Marlowe’s.”

“Right. Some sort of channeled demon playwright. Of course . . .”

“When it was over, there was silence. The collective, unintelligible *ah* of reverence. What a playwright dreams of his whole life. Finally, one clap led to

several until the entire theatre lit up in a cacophony of booming, thunderous applause. As the actors finished taking their bows, a chant rose from the crowd: ‘Drest. Drest. Drest.’ Music to my ears. A sound I’d yearned for as long as I can remember. I took the stage with the actors and watched the audience cheer. I too bowed. It felt like an eternity. A perfect instant captured in time.”

“But they were not celebrating your work,” Rantz scoffed.

“Regardless . . . You see, gentlemen, creators are at our core a pathetic breed. We despise yet revere the opinions of our audiences. We create so that we can re-create those tiny moments of our lives when our mothers said to us, ‘Good boy. You did well.’ It is that which we all eternally seek most. Many of us know what sadness that fact truly is, making it worse, an addiction of a different sort. I could say this was my first curse . . . one I have borne my entire life.”

“Not a curse that will get you free from the gallows, Drest. Tell me more of the malevolence.”

“That night, despite everything, was the greatest night of my life. Barimos’s exotic women surrounded me as if I were a star fallen from the sky that they would do anything to be near. I had all I wished. Status, liquor, opium, women . . . and praise. Validation! They believed I was a genius. I returned to my hovel two days later . . . two days of celebration. I had almost begun to believe that the voice I had heard was nothing more than a dream, part of the deluded debauchery, when upon opening the door, I heard it again. ‘Dreereest.’ What followed was laughter—the most ominous, horrific laughter ever to fill my ears. Deep. Bellowing. Mockery as if the tables had now turned in Marlowe’s favor.

“ ‘Shut up! SHUT UP! I am loved again, you . . . you monster!’ He did not respond, just laughed. My domicile was flush with his haunting glee. And this was the way I knew it would be for the rest of my days. My lodger always a presence, always there to remind me of how we were bound . . . And then came you, Mr. Malchus . . . you and your Zakarum priests. The Desote had lines down the muddy roads to see *The Dark Exile*. It was heralded throughout the lands as the most gruesome, horrific play ever put to stage. The ultimate in theatre macabre. Men and women of all shapes, sizes, and creeds poured into Westmarch to see my . . . to see it. And that’s when you came, you and your band of clerics, to protest the blasphemy. You were right, sir. You were right. But your protests, they only did a disservice to your cause. The more your priests lined up outside of the theatre, the more the theatre patron line grew.”

“Perhaps.”

“I of course was enjoying my newfound fame. The women, the high-society types. All of it. All but my residence . . . a place where I spent as little time as I could. A place I could not leave. If I moved out, I feared someone would find the body. If I tried to move the body, I feared that someone on my busy road would see. The smell was bad enough, but the company was the worst . . . Marlowe’s voice would whisper to me all night from below. ‘Dreeeest!’ he’d call out. ‘Dreeeest, you must now complete what you have started and damn yourself as I have . . . Dreeeeest.’

“It’s funny what a man can live with. After a time, the stone-cold fear the voice would generate in me was no more, and instead it was like the ambient sound of living near a bustling street. A nuisance, sure, but not an unbearable one. It was just background noise. Until . . . until a messenger arrived, summoning me to Lord Barimos’s office.”

“That’s right. It was on that morning when you and I first met, wasn’t it?” Rantz’s smile was sarcastically bright.

“Yes. It was that morning.”

“A morning you said you had not even a second for me due to your rushing to your meeting. Yet, funny thing about being a constable . . . people are forced to make the time. Certainly when the words ‘foul play’ are uttered.”

“You suspected me from the start, Rantz. You are a fine sleuth.”

Rantz touched his nose. “It’s a good ol’ sniffer, isn’t it? I could smell treachery the moment I met you. It’s a common odor amongst pipe tokers.”

“And yet you had no evidence.”

“I didn’t then.”

“Get on with it. What happened with Barimos?” Malchus barked.

“There is another saying used in the theatre communities on Skovos: you are only as good as your last work. My lord Barimos lives by this principle.”

“Ahh, he wanted the other half, didn’t he? Part two?”

“Your powers of deduction again are impressive, Constable.”

Rantz didn’t like the playwright’s tone. It was clear he was considering another strike, but Drest went on before he could act.

“Barimos gave me a hug, congratulated me on my success, and then expressed concern about Mr. Marlowe’s disappearance. With Marlowe gone, the Desote now relied on me. It was what I had wanted back . . . except I had to deliver. He insisted it be soon.”

"And you wrote it?" Malchus questioned.

"No . . . not at first. Once again, I could not write. I came home to laughter. The cruelest of laughter. Marlowe had known. Somehow in death he had known. I could tell in his tone before he said a word. But his laughter—his whistling, throat-crushed, windpipe-spattered laughter—rang in my ears, boomed from the earth below. I sat to write, and as Marlowe knew, nothing would come. My muse had been taken. Killed, perhaps. Marlowe's evil spell, his wicked game, was complete.

"After two nights of sitting at my desk, scribbling notes but having no real clue of where the play was to go—of how I could ever match the level of divine mastery *Part One* achieved—I began to plan an escape. Take my money and fame and run, leaving the play a mystery. But before the thought could crystallize, Marlowe, my old chum, old friend, finally spoke again.

" 'You have to finish it now, what you've started. You have to do what I did. All you have to do is ask, Drest. All you have to do is ask for my help.' Then came more laughter.

"The voice haunted me. I covered my ears. I pounded on the boards, begging him to stop the laughter. I—he wouldn't leave me alone, and no matter how much I tried to ignore it . . . I knew he was right."

"This is madness. You are a very sick man, Mr. Drest. The fantastical mind that allowed you to be such an acclaimed writer has led you down this tragic path. Yet it is no excuse to save you from what you have done. Priest, there is no evidence here for anything more than a mad, infirm man."

"You are testing my patience, Constable. If you would like to exit, you may, and I will give you my report later."

"Oh no, I'm staying till the end. Continue, wright."

"It is simple. I asked Marlowe for his aid. He responded, 'I will show you the ritual. But you must free me from here.'"

"And so I did, removing the floorboards to find a body infested with pus, white maggots, almost enough to cover the shape of Marlowe's oozing body. Rats had gnawed out his organs. The smell alone caused me nearly to vomit. But the sight was worse, indelibly etched into my mind. Marlowe rose from the earth, pulling himself from the hole I had put him in. The maggots dripped across my floor; each step he took made a squishing sound as he crushed them below his boot. It was a horrifying spectacle, his gray visage bloated and deformed. Finally, turning to me, he said, 'We are working together now,

Drest. Who would have ever thought?’ And then that horrid, exasperated laughter returned.”

“And the ritual?”

“We began. Marlowe’s lumbering body placed candles and drew strange sigils upon the floor. I had to cover my nose several times to avoid vomiting, his corpse was so ripe. This seemed to amuse my old rival endlessly. He told me that we would be channeling great power from dark masters, power from Belial and Azmodan themselves . . . It didn’t matter. It was the only way to get back on that stage, to hear that applause again, to feel the rush of that success. He guided my quill into my hand and sat me down in the middle of a circle he had drawn. I laid out the vellum before me. The candles burned, surrounding me in flaming light, the shadows bending what looked like dreadful images across the walls. We started to chant. He said to mimic the words he spoke. I know not what they meant. I only know that I was able to reproduce them. Then, before it happened, I heard him say, ‘It is done, Drest. You and I are bound forever . . . You are as much of a failure as I.’

“He chuckled heartily as I readied myself for what was to come. When it did, it was as if the world had faded away, as if the light of the candles had burst into my eyes. I could feel heat unimaginable. I screamed bloody horror as the shadows on my walls formed sinister figures and leaped at me. These strange shadow demons grabbed my hand and pressed it to the parchment, which I could not see anymore. Smoke clogged my eyesight, and unintelligible whispers swarmed all around me, grating into my mind.

“I saw glimpses of a war in the Hells. The great Prime Evils were taken aback by the brazenness of the Lessers. Demons fought each other, and pain and agony reigned. Cries of anguish! I could see the fury of warring beings beyond comprehension, staccato flashes of demonic beasts fighting in a pit of flame. It was hot. Oh, so hot. I felt as if my skin was burning. And then the heat washed away, and the images coalesced until I found myself in the chambers of the Lessers and the serenity of a moment free from warfare.

“Andariel and Duriel were arguing; they wanted to break the pact with the other Lessers. I could hear their voices. ‘What have we done?’ Duriel asked in a trembling tenor. ‘They will destroy us all. They will never stop until—’

“Belial—I could see him—a spindly wraith with a jaw full of razor-sharp teeth, revolting yet powerful, had stepped into the cavern. ‘How dare you question! How dare you deny yourselves victory! Long have the Primes lorded

over us. Long have they thought themselves our betters. Diablo . . . Diablo will fall, as will the rest. Do not be swayed or led to fear by him. Do not, for each of you will reign. Each of you will share the power we will earn.' I could feel his lies. I knew that Belial spoke with his own interests in mind, that he had machinations beyond what he'd show his family.

"And then a whoosh of flame and shadow spun around me. Maddening, whirling. Whispers abounded. I felt as if I was being watched. My hand burned as if it were on fire. I could occasionally see it below me, moving vigorously across pages, filling them up with ink. Scenes scorched by, images of cataclysmic warfare in realms of the Hells so vast and different that they cannot be communicated by the rudimentary tools our words truly are.

"A new scene became apparent. I was there, sitting in that bleak chamber, a spiderweb-filled, black throne room. The Primes were bound. They had lost. They struggled against some sort of spectral binding that only grew tighter around their frames the more the Three resisted.

"Diablo spoke. His words rang into my ears, booming, resounding, echoing.

" 'You do not know what you dare to do, Belial, Azmodan. The punishment for this will be beyond anything you can fathom, Duriel.' Diablo, the horned beast, looked right at the Lesser Evil. Duriel shook, terror consuming him. I could feel that terror consuming me as well, a wash of panicked cold . . . I could see that the other Lessers despised his fear.

" 'You will all suffer. You will all be destroyed!' Baal, the Lord of Destruction, raged.

" 'I will burn you from the hovels you call your kingdoms. I will return, and my wrath will be unstoppable,' Mephisto, the Lord of Hatred, said.

"Suddenly I could see the ground open below the Primes. The lords, these great demons, were being pulled down, the floor turning into flesh that gave way as they screamed, cast out of the pits they once called home. But the Lord of Terror did not scream like his brothers. Instead, as Marlowe had done to torment me, Diablo laughed. His laughter was terrible, corroding the Lessers' sense of victory.

"The whirl of flame spun back over my eyes, revealing the Prime Evils as they were banished from the Hells, into the world of men. Into *our* lands! I could see their forms being pushed upward through the ground of Sanctuary like strange earth-caked creatures until they dispersed, each nothing but a black wisp set to infect our world . . . They are amongst us. I could see the



Lessers ruling in the Hells, betraying each other, their pact not to last. But worse, I could see the sorrows of countless men and women, our brothers and sisters, tormented by the base evil that the Primes had unleashed, that the Lessers had sent to us. They were . . . they *are* with us . . . here on this world. Finally, a voice dominated all thoughts in my head. One powerful figure loomed, saying, ‘You are mine now!’

“My eyes snapped open. Early morning blue seeped through my blocked-out windows. The candles had burned into crusted nests of wax. Hours had passed. An entire night. I was cold, shivering, as my clothing was soaked with cooled sweat. I could not see Marlowe anywhere. The floorboards were back in place. He was gone, as if the ritual had never happened at all. I felt a pain in my hand. Sharp, burning. Looking down, I saw it was clasped in a knotted ball, and next to it was a manuscript: *The Dark Exile, Part Two*. It was stacked neatly in front of me, my quill worn to the feather.”

“And that is when we arrived,” Rantz said.

“Yes. You and your guards bursting through my door.”

“You ran with your manuscript.”

“I did.”

“But it was of little use, as here you are.”

“You know what I saw when I ran from you?”

“What?”

“Maggots . . . a trail of maggots leading to where Marlowe was beneath the floorboards. Everything I told you is true, you see? It all happened,” Drest pleaded. This moment, he felt, was determining his destiny.

“Oh, there were maggots, alright. Maggots and a decomposing corpse and candles and the nonsense you just talked about. But that there corpse didn’t do no dance for me or my boys, nor did it have very much to say. It did sure stink, though, and it did sure have maggots. Livin’ with a body like that is likely to drive a man a little over the edge, make him believe he’s hearing voices and under demonic influence.”

Malchus placed the manuscript for *The Dark Exile, Part Two* in front of Drest. “You are saying that this is the work of demons?”

“I—I am. How can you not see this? It is plain as day!”

“You’ve heard enough here, priest. You must pass judgment now, eh? It’s getting dark out. We wasted near a day listening to this rubbish.”

“You must see, sir. Now you see, don’t you?”

"I will pass judgment, Constable Rantz. But I need to perform one last task. A rite of sorts. It is one of great secrecy, and I insist upon privacy."

Rantz eyed the hooded figure for a long moment. "If it means we can end this charade, fine by me. I'll prepare the gallows, eh?" Before leaving the cell, he turned to Drest. "See you soon, chum. Great storyteller you are indeed. Wild imagination. Sure gave me stories for the week . . . Pity we will lose your talent."

Once they were alone, Malchus stepped into the light, sitting in the chair the constable had used, directly across from Drest. Drest began to shake, a coldness sweeping over him. "I think I'm going to be sick, sir. I . . . It's been so long without a toke. I'm scared . . . I'm so very scared."

"As you should be."

"Do you see the demonic influence here, sir? Do you see that I cannot be faulted for what has happened, that there is evil behind all of this? I am . . . I am just a pawn in this. Are you . . . are you going to let me go? I swear I will never, never give in to my base emotions again. I will never allow myself to be consumed by jealousy or—"

"Silence!"

Malchus flipped the hood back over his head. Drest gasped. The first thing he noticed was the milky white eye covered in a film. *The man from the opium den!*

"What is this?!"

"I can feel your mind racing, putting puzzle pieces in their place. Yet you're too feeble to realize the bigger picture, Samuel Drest. Marlowe could not finish what he had started. Marlowe tried to stop his journey down our path. He didn't wish for *The Dark Exile* to be birthed in the world—for humanity to know the truth, for that truth to terrify man's very being. He was going to come home and burn the manuscript. And so . . . we found you. We knew that your jealousy and failure would lead you to us. To the ritual. And it has."

"Who—who are you?!"

"Oh, a servant to my master, Belial, who wants all to know of his great victory. He desires all to know that he has cursed the world of men with the presence of his beloved family. Your play—or, *his*—will last forever, passed from man to man. A story once heard can never be unheard. It is the ultimate mind worm, living eternal in its host . . . Yours is a sad tale, Mr. Drest. Turns out Marlowe and you were so very much alike."

“But . . . but . . . why did you protest the play if you wanted it to be shown?”

Malchus laughed. “Did you not say that controversy produces copper? It is the dinner whistle for the masses. It drives the curious! There will be even more controversy over this piece—the last work of a hanged, mad playwright! A genius murderer who told the most gossiping of constables that he received his vision for these plays from demons. That man of law will spread this rumor, and as the play tours, it will tour with it. You will live in infamy, and all of mankind will know the horrors that are amongst them. Or, if not directly believe it, they will feel the truth in it; the story will become part of their lives forever, and those lives will never be the same.”

“But I—HELP!!! HELP!! CONSTABLE RANTZ, HELP!” Drest screamed until Malchus covered his mouth with his wrinkled palm.

“There is a price for shortcuts, Mr. Drest. Sometimes they take you down roads you shouldn’t ever go on . . . Hang well.”

Outside near the gallows, Constable Rantz could hear Drest’s crazed shouts. Tightening the rope and preparing it for the hanging, he smiled as he replayed the confession he had just heard in his mind. He couldn’t wait to tell the boys at the tavern of the mad playwright and his insane, deluded story. He couldn’t wait to tell his wife and the butcher or the baker. Of course, first there was a hanging to attend to.



# The Hunger

Erik Sabol

## I

It was the wind, he reasoned. Just the wind.

He was nearly asleep when the noise came again—a bubbling hiss whispering from the back of his wagon.

Rigley squinted through the darkness, eyes darting nervously around the camp. The camels slept unperturbed in their hitches, legs curled beneath them. The young woman—Lidra, she had called herself—dozed soundly near the dying embers of the campfire. Rigley's wagon sat still, otherwise silent save for the subtle creaks it surrendered to the Aranoch breeze.

The desert was quiet, cold, and empty. The dunes rolled for miles to each horizon, lifeless like ice in the moonlight. Rigley had been delivering supplies through this region for years. He knew that it was a relatively safe section of the desert, too far from the major trade routes to tempt bandits but close enough to Lut Gholein to be clear of any dangerous beasts. This sound . . . it was coming from *inside* his wagon.

Where Lidra had stored her gear.

The hissing noise came again. Rigley lurched from his blankets and snatched a dinner fork from the sand. For the first time in years, he found himself regretting his lack of weaponry . . . or martial training. They had never seemed worth the effort, and his cargo had never been valuable enough to draw even the most desperate thieves. He held the fork high and stepped cautiously toward his wagon.

The sand was cool between his toes. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead beneath a heavy thatch of red-brown hair. They trickled down and ran over the swell of his cheeks.

His pulse quickened. He shuffled closer—a stout, fleshy silhouette in the dim moonlight—and the sound went quiet. Rigley offered a quick glance over one shoulder. Lidra hadn't moved. Her face was peaceful in the fading firelight.

He stepped into the shadow of the old wagon. The hiss returned, bled

through the gaps in the warped, crooked planks, and the frame seemed to tremble.

Rigley laid a shaky hand on the timber. He looked through a narrow slit between two boards, but inside the wagon was dark.

Carefully he crept around the side, fork quivering in his hand, and peeked into the cabin. “Who’s there?” he said, and something shifted among the inventory. He reeled back, utensil extended, eyeing the cargo in the shadows.

The hiss intensified, then faded into a long, throaty groan. An alabaster jug rolled from the wagon and thudded to the sand. Sitting where it had been was Lidra’s sack—a small, crudely woven bag tied off with twine. At least, that was what it had appeared to be when Lidra had first carried it into his wagon. But now, now the cloth was on fire with purple light. Rigley stepped nearer and saw that the light had taken the form of runes, ancient letters, which writhed around the sack as if they were serpents.

Rigley took another step and tried to get a closer look. He was no expert in magical artifacts, but he knew that they could be of immense value if one spoke with the right people. The woman, Lidra, she must have been trying to fool Rigley into thinking this was just a mundane bag, for she had simply tossed it into the back of the wagon with the rest of her gear. What better way to hide a fortune? Rigley grinned at her cleverness . . . and at his own. Now to find out what jeweled treasure lay inside.

He reached to touch it. The cloth flinched, and Rigley withdrew his arm. His wide brow wrinkled, and again he reached toward the writhing sack with an unsteady hand. His fingers closed in. The bag twisted and thrashed furiously. Gently, he touched the burlap—heart hammering, breath caught in his chest—and froze.

Her blade was cold against his neck.

“Touch it again, and I open your throat,” Lidra said.

## II

“Look,” he said, mustering the courage to speak. “I’m sorry.”

The sun hung just above the western horizon. It had been a long, silent day of travel, and Rigley was removing his tent and other gear from the wagon. He carefully placed his things (dinner plates, blankets, pots, and pans), wary of the

sack, which sat disturbingly still behind the alabaster jug.

Lidra shielded her eyes from the harsh light. “That’s the first thing you’ve said to me all day.” Nervously, he wet his lips. He did not turn to meet her stare. “You’re not one for conversation, are you?” she continued.

“Not one for people,” he said. “That’s why I love Aranoch. Nobody for days in any direction.”

“Don’t be so sure.” She scooped up her lavender robes and sat cross-legged in the sand. “I saw a campfire last night. Looked to be about half a day’s journey south.”

“Nomads, probably. It pays to be unsociable out here.”

“Are they dangerous?” she asked.

“A nuisance, more than anything. I’ve never had one put a knife to my throat.” He winced as the words left his mouth, and offered Lidra a hesitant grin. Casually, she pulled the blade from her robes. It sparkled in the sunlight—seven inches of curved, wicked steel—the hilt wrapped with strips of black leather. Rigley’s heart jumped. “That looks familiar.” He coughed fretfully. “It’s nice.”

“Just a precaution,” she said. “I carry several on me.”

“How vigilant,” he jested.

She pointed toward the wagon. “I keep eight others hidden around me. Don’t worry about bandits.”

He chuckled. “It’s not the bandits I worry about,” he said. But she did not respond, and the silence hung heavy. It ate at him. He searched desperately for something to say.

“What, uh . . . what’s in the sack?”

Her head jerked. Tension permeated the air around him. He took a deep, shaky breath.

“Don’t touch it,” she said.

“No, no, I wasn’t going—”

“Get away from the wagon, Rigley.”

“I just don’t—”

She flicked her wrist. The knife splintered a plank inches from his head, and the air left his lungs in a startled whoosh.

“I am unfamiliar with this place,” she said. “And I need to get across it quickly. That is why I hired you. They said nobody knows this pathetic stretch of sand better than you.”

Rigley tried to interrupt. “Yes, but only as a trader. I’ve never had to carry —”

“You will get me across these sands, and then we will be finished.”

Rigley nodded. The pay was good. He could content himself with that, he thought. He turned away to prepare the evening meal, taking stock of his provisions.

He still had that last keg of Caldeum sweet wine belted to the side of the wagon. He’d been saving it for a special occasion. Maybe she would accept a gift, an apology, of exotic drink? And maybe she would not be aware of how deceptively strong that draft was. Rigley smiled. The shifting lights, the glowing runes, played through his mind.

### III

He worked quietly while she slept.

He unloaded her belongings from the back of the wagon, stacking them in a messy pile near the rear wheels, dumping her boots, robes, and blanket-wrapped knives. But he hesitated when he reached for the sack.

It was silent, yet it wiggled and squirmed. The lights pulsed and shivered. Rigley furrowed his brow and leaned in close. A charred, pungent smell like bad tobacco filled his nostrils. It stung his eyes, burnt his throat, and piqued his curiosity.

He unrolled Lidra’s weapons blanket and grabbed a throwing knife from the pile. Then he moved back to the sack. It thrashed like a pinned animal. Rigley lifted it with one hand and severed the twine with the knife. The squirming ceased, and the bag became limp in his grasp.

It was too dark to see inside. He held it warily at arm’s length, but the sack looked empty at that distance, like a satchel of shadows housing a burning stench. He gave a gentle squeeze, trying to elicit a kick or jerk, but the fabric sagged lifelessly as if it were old skin. He shook it, listening for the deep growl, but there was nothing. All he heard was the gentle stream of desert wind through the campsite.

He squinted in the poor, mercurial light. The bag gave a jolt as he moved into the starlight, and within, his face inches from the woven cloth, he saw it: a black, twisting sludge—a charred, fetid, shuddering mass—reaching toward



him with dark fingers.

The wagon driver dropped the sack and fell backward. Inky tendrils erupted from the burlap and snatched hold of his face. They thickened as they dug into his cheeks. His eyes widened. The tendrils pried open his mouth, and just as he made to scream, the creature forced itself down his throat.

He convulsed as it squeezed past his neck, wedging into his esophagus. His chest tightened around it. His ribs stretched and popped. It clawed toward his stomach, burning like a clot of liquid ash, and plopped heavily in his belly.

Rigley found his breath. He wiped away the tears that blurred his vision. Thick lines of snot and drool coated his face, and he whimpered.

Was Lidra still sleeping on the other side of camp? She had downed a sizeable portion of his wine. But . . . but she had seemed so intense, so *furios*, when she had last caught him. Panic ripped through him. He jumped to his feet, heart thudding against his rib cage, and weighed his options.

She would know. She would know, and she would be livid. She would use her knives . . . A fear welled up in his heavy gut, a fear that was panic and rage and fervent black strength.

“Rigley, what . . . ?”

Lidra’s voice had a cold edge of anger. She blinked, trying to clear her head, and fumbled for her dagger as she stepped forward.

In a burst of strength, he spun and knocked her into the side of the wagon. The aged wood shattered, and the woman was buried in falling bundles and broken planks.

The fear took jagged shape in Rigley’s mind, something primal and undeniable.

*Run!*

## IV

Lidra’s eyes fluttered open. She coughed the sand from her lungs and squirmed out from under a splintered plank. She lay there, exhausted, staring up at the immeasurable Aranoch sky, lacerations decorating her skin like tiger stripes. Her robes were tangled about her frame. Her breaths were coarse and uneven, and the fatigue, the baking heat, and the stinging sensation in her limbs and torso cautioned her to crawl back in the debris and hide.

She sat up, pain slicing through her chest, and scanned the sand around her for any signs of the cloth sack. She dug for it, rummaging in the wagon's rubble, flipping wood and canvas, tearing the skin of her fingertips.

"Where is it?" she muttered, sifting frantically through sand.

"Miss?" The voice at her back was gravelly and worn.

In a single flowing motion, Lidra drew a knife from her boot and flung it at the silhouette behind her. The blade whistled past the man's face, and he gasped.

He was old, as scrawny as a starving scarecrow, but his reaction was immediate. He unhitched a tarnished, chipped sword from his hip and tilted the point toward her. "Show me your hands," he said warily. He feigned a thrust.

She slowly raised them, palms outward. "Sorry," she said. "I was just surprised. That was my only knife. I swear."

He took a cautious step forward. "Who are you?"

Lidra, keeping her hands up, sat down in the sand. "I was on this wagon."

The grip on his blade eased, and he surveyed the wreck. "Are there others?"

"No."

His eyes, narrow and brown, softened. He traced her lacerations in the air with the tip of his sword. "Can you stand?"

Her back throbbed between her bruised shoulder blades where she had slammed into the wagon. "I think so. Do you have any water?"

He hesitated, the wrinkles on his face deepening for a moment, then nodded. He hitched the blade to his hip and offered her a hand.

His palm was rough and cracked and sweaty, and his strength impressed her. He lifted her from the sand and dusted off the torn remnants of her robes.

"My name is Slavut," he said, but he was greeted with no response. "What's yours, miss?"

"It's not important," said Lidra.

"Where are you from?"

She stared at him, expressionless.

He pursed his lips. "What'd you do there?"

"Nothing of relevance," she said.

Slavut inspected the debris. "I don't know what happened out here, miss, but you can trust me. I was a priest in my other life."

She raised an eyebrow. "Your *other* life?" He smiled. "And what do you do in

*this* life?” she said.

The old man shrugged. “Survive.”

“That’s quite a distinction, Slavut.”

He laughed and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I killed a man who had killed my son. Such behavior is frowned upon in the priesthood.” His voice rose. “I made my peace with that.” She could tell he was lying.

He pulled the waterskin from his belt and tossed it to her. “So what happened out here?”

“I was . . . attacked. Some desert beast.” She popped the cork and took a heavy draft. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Scavenging,” he said. He pointed to a pair of vultures that had perched on the other side of camp, obviously hoping that Lidra would not wake. “Like them. This desert is hell. No food. No water. You go where the vultures go. They know how to survive.”

She gulped down the last of his water. “Did you, by chance, see anything—or anyone—nearby when you arrived?”

Slavut grunted disagreeably. “You mean did I see your wagon-smashing desert beast? No.” He clearly doubted her story.

She cursed under her breath and turned, giving the planks and tarpaulins and supplies another look.

“Stole something of yours, I take it?” Slavut said.

“Something, yes.”

He put his hand on her shoulder. “There’s no use worrying about it now. Let’s head back to my camp. Get some food in your belly.”

She scanned the wreckage of the wagon, saw that the camels were gone. The food and water containers had already been ransacked by scavengers; those vultures must have arrived late.

“How many are there at your camp?”

“A dozen,” he said. “The last remnants of a village overtaken by the desert. We’re searching for a new place to settle.” Slavut’s eyes darkened. “Or a weak village we can take.”

“Very priestly of you,” she jested, returning the waterskin to him.

The old man grinned, but there was pain in his expression. “Those church days are behind me, miss. The path of enlightenment didn’t bring me any light. So I’ve switched to survival. It’s a much straighter road.”

“Hard to spend time on your knees when your mouth is dry.”

Slavut nodded. He leaned in close and cupped a hand conspiratorially around his lips. "In this desert," he whispered, "it's always about survival."

Lidra smiled coldly. She had made up her mind about the man. "Do you think I could hire you, Slavut? To find someone for me?"

His brow furrowed. He looked over his shoulder and then back at Lidra, humming. "I don't think so, miss. We're awfully busy as it is."

She stepped closer to him, her eyes sharp and engaging. "I need your help. There's a man in this desert. His name is Rigley."

Slavut eyed her with caution.

"He did this." She motioned toward the wrecked wagon.

The old man surveyed the surrounding plain. "Which direction did he run?"

Lidra took hold of his arm and squeezed. "I don't know, but he has something that belongs to me. Something I want back. I can't find him on my own. I need you to help me track him."

"And kill him?"

She chewed her cracked, bloodied lip. "Not exactly. Just . . . subdue him."

Slavut's mouth straightened into a thin white line, and he shrugged regretfully. "I don't know," he said.

"Do you have weapons? At the camp?"

"Yes, but—"

Her grip on his arm tightened. "I *need* you to help me, Slavut. Please."

He pulled away. Something in her tone frightened him. "Any other time, and I'd be glad to help. But we've got business of our own, miss. You're welcome to come with us, but this desert's unforgiving. As I said, our main purpose is survival."

Lidra sighed. Her arms dangled heavily at her sides, and her gaze fell. "Which way is camp?" she muttered.

Slavut turned and pointed. "East. About half a day's walk."

A knife thudded into his back, ripping through his lung. He swallowed bile and blood and swayed to face Lidra.

She smirked and stepped toward him. A light shove forced him backward, and he collapsed into the dirt. His lips were slick and red, and his eyes wide. He stared up at her, wheezing and choking.

Lidra flipped him to his stomach and wrenched the knife from his back. She cleaned it on his robes and slid it into her boot.

“East, then,” she said, and she headed toward the horizon.

## V

It spoke in feelings, not words—great, crushing urges in his head. Tidal waves of throbbing emotion.

*Exhaustion*, it said on the first night. And he slept in the desert alone under the cold sky.

*Power*, it said on the second, and his body trembled at the command. His limbs tightened and contorted. His joints unhitched. His skin rippled and pulsed, shifting from pale to dark and then back again. Bones twisted, snapping and re-forming, ripping through his flesh, and he screamed until he lost consciousness.

*Hunger*, it said on the third.

Rigley lay beaten in a crater of sand. His belly rumbled fiercely, painfully, and he spoke for the first time in three days. “There’s nothing to eat out here!” he cried. “Nothing.” His voice was foreign and gruff, his throat shredded by the transformation.

*Hunger.*

A spear of pain tore through his stomach. He tottered to his feet. His bones popped and crackled beneath his muscles, brittle reeds under dark and merciless wind. The sores on his skin ached against the breeze, weeping into the sand. He inhaled sharply, the ribs protruding from his chest stretching and tugging at his flesh, and roared his agony into the emptiness.

The creature in his belly twitched. It sat heavily within him. His legs buckled, and he collapsed to the ground, coughing and sobbing.

One word—not a word, he thought, but a sensation—echoed through his mind. Centrally. Violently.

*Hunger.*

## VI

The camel must have recognized his scent and followed him. It was one of his more loyal creatures, pulling Rigley’s wagon with its fellows across the meandering route for years. Now in a haze of pain and hunger, he couldn’t

even remember its name, but Rigley knew it lacked the instincts of self-preservation one might find in a wild camel. It would not know to fear him. The stomach pains crackled, and Rigley's eyes grew wide.

*Hunger.*

He stood on wobbly, disfigured legs and watched the beast as it nosed through a hardy patch of brown weeds clinging to the side of a rocky outcropping. A wad of saliva collected in the back of his throat. He wet his lips and swallowed it down.

*Hunger.*

His eyes locked on the creature, and his pulse quickened. His stomach screamed at him in a low, angry roar that seemed to shake the hills. The camel wandered near him, its hair matted and torn. A narrow gash on its flank shimmered slickly against the fur. Rigley's nostrils flared. He clenched his jaw. He began to tremble.

The camel had no time to react. Rigley sprang from the darkness, a blur of man and shadow, and knocked the beast off its feet. He was upon it, one twisted claw of a hand pinning the animal's head to the sand while the other ripped at its belly and fished out the innards. His veins swelled with black energy as he feasted.

Rigley rolled away from the mutilated corpse. Lines of red fluid trickled from his lips. His belly rose and fell with each hurried breath, and he sucked air into his lungs in wet, whooping gasps. He cleared his throat and looked at the carcass. The camel was hollow, an enormous cloak of bloodied hair lying limp in the sand, its tendons frayed and gnawed, its bones broken and spilling marrow.

He wanted to be disgusted. It smelled like the back alley of a butcher shop. Crimson splashes decorated the ground. His hands were sticky with blood, bile, and gastric fluid.

But the sight—the revulsion—only excited his appetite. He licked his fingers. His gut rumbled. His veins pulsed. The creature's voice rang through his head . . .

*Hunger.*

. . . and he wanted to feed.

A campfire flickered on the dark horizon like a firefly against a twilight ocean. Rigley lumbered toward it, his eyes wide and glossy, saliva dripping from his torn lips.

Several yards to his back, Lidra watched from behind a dune. For hours she had followed him eastward at a distance, knuckles white around the hilt of a dagger.

She could tell that he had already eaten. His veins were thick and black and bulging, wrapping his frame like vines on a trellis, and the darkness had begun to stain his skin. Beneath her anger, she felt a tinge of sympathy for the man, for he had no idea of the nature of the beast sleeping in his stomach, no concept of the terror it would work and the kingdoms it would ruin when it was strong enough to overtake his form completely.

And she knew that each drop of blood the wagon driver ingested was a step in the wrong direction, a minor victory for the shadow demon. The craving would eventually consume Rigley, forcing him to imbibe the blood and bile of his victims until the madness engulfed him.

Then he would be gone: his body broken, his mind deteriorated, and the lesser remnants of his humanity suffocated by the strength of the demon.

She had to stop him, or her prize would be lost forever.

There had been several openings, brief moments of vulnerability, when he had paused to pass fluid or to catch his breath. But she smelled the fire leaking from his pores. The fervent, insatiable hunger.

So she waited.

By morning he would arrive at the camp, and he would devour the people there. And after he had gorged himself on their remains, becoming satiated and calm, his guard would fall. Then she would finish him. She would carve the monster from his gut—a mercy, in truth—and let Rigley bleed out in the desert.

A good lesson, she thought, for the prying wagon driver. And a frustrating diversion from her task.

## VIII

They were refugees, the dozen of them. The sun had breached the horizon, and the stranger was in full view. It hobbled toward their camp—a hulking,

misshapen figure with dark, throbbing veins down its face and neck.

The refugees had gathered together and were huddled behind their giant. Two men, six women, and three children—the group spanning three generations—waited in Uroto's shadow. He stood nearly seven feet, his shoulders wide and strong like a stone wall. Bearded, bald, and shirtless, he watched the newcomer shamle forward, his hands solidly locked around the hilt of a blade the size of a small man.

The creature was short. Ugly. Rough, bony spikes poked from its chest. The splits in its flesh were charred, and its clothes dangled in tatters from its rotund frame.

"What do you want, stranger?" Uroto's voice boomed through the desert. He remained rigid as an oak as the outsider approached.

It limped into camp, smelling of rust and burning meat. Its face—swollen, black, with jagged teeth and bleeding lips—turned up to gaze at the giant.

"I'm hungry," it said. The words were a garbled, guttural mess.

Uroto smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, friend, but we have no food to spare. As it stands, we will barely make it out of Aranoch." The creature looked with confusion at the other refugees, then back at Uroto. But it did not speak. "Where did you come from?" asked the big man.

"I was . . ." it started absently, as if distracted. "I was a trader. My wagon . . ."

"Did you come across a man in your travels? Our leader, Slavut, he left to scout the area ahead and has not returned. Tough old fellow, carries a sword?"

It seemed to be listening to an entirely different conversation. Or many of them. "I . . . I don't deserve this," it said. "I was helping the young lady with a delivery to Khanduras. Such . . . such a pretty thing."

"What are you doing here?"

"The delivery . . . it . . . it went bad," it mumbled. Then it glanced up with a strange, imploring expression. "This wasn't supposed to happen."

"What are you doing *here*? In our camp?"

It pondered the words. "I—" It stopped. Nodded. Grinned. "I've come to kill and eat you all."

Uroto's eyes narrowed. His muscles tensed. "You are unwell, stranger. Why threaten those who might aid you?"

"Because . . . because I am hungry."

It pounced. Uroto sidestepped, redirecting its momentum with the flat of his blade. The creature found its footing and leapt again, colliding with the



giant and bowling him over. It was a whirlwind of motion clawing at his face and neck. Uroto drove it back and staggered to his feet. The surrounding refugees scattered, screaming.

This man-thing, this *demon*, measured its opponent. Its veins throbbed. Uroto tightened his grip on his sword and lunged forward, swinging the blade down. The creature rolled to the left, and the sword thudded into the ground, spitting sand into the air. The intruder charged on all fours and crashed against him. Uroto tumbled to the earth, losing his hold on the enormous weapon.

The demon sprang atop the giant and grabbed onto his skull. Thick, shadowy pigment bled like ink from the thing's fingertips and stained the warrior's face. Uroto's scream was cut short as the creature twisted his head from his neck. Throwing the spurting object aside, it leaned down and began to feast.

It fed with bestial abandon, eyes spinning erratically in their sockets. It shoveled heaps of dripping meat into its maw, watching the other refugees as they ran.

## IX

It was growing inside him.

He felt it kicking and wriggling in his belly, bathing in the blood of his victims. Its voice—the urge—deepened and intensified with every corpse he consumed. His veins had thickened and hardened in his face and neck. His skin had darkened to coal, and he stood out against the sand like a black pearl on white velvet.

They were dead, everyone he could find. He had devoured them in messy handfuls until only one body remained.

She had been a pretty girl, almost a woman. Her eyes were glassy and sunken. He grabbed her arm and prepared to rip it from her torso.

"Stop," came a meek voice at his back. "Not her."

Rigley turned. A young boy, fair skinned and thin, stood before him. He held the hilt of Uroto's sword in his hands. He struggled with the weapon and could muster the strength only to lift the tip from the sand, though he couldn't hold it up for long.

*Hunger*, demanded the demon.

But there was a cold determination in the boy's face. Rigley dropped the arm, swallowed the leftover bits of flesh in his throat, and studied him from afar. He was scrawny and visibly shaken, but the youngster's eyes never wavered.

Rigley wiped the greasy fat from his lips with a forearm and took a step forward. "Who is she?"

Tears ran down the boy's cheeks, but his face was stone. He spoke carefully. "My sister. And I intend to bury her."

*Hunger!*

"Why? She's dead. She doesn't mind the heat."

"Because it's the right thing to do."

Rigley approached him. The child's breathing quickened, and his eyes grew wide, but he held his ground. Again he strained against the weight of Uroto's sword, but he failed to lift it.

Rigley leaned close. The smell of the boy was maddening; the scent of hot blood pushing through his veins sent shivers down his back.

"You're confident, little one."

"I was taught to be."

"Even against a demon?"

"Against everyone."

Their faces were inches apart. Rigley read the fear in the child, but behind it he saw conviction and strength. And it unnerved him.

"I believe you," Rigley said.

*Hunger!*

Rigley's stomach growled, but he made no move to eat the boy standing against him. "What's your name?" the wagon driver asked.

"Kulin."

"Are you afraid of me, Kulin?"

"Yes," he breathed. The word barely escaped his lips.

*Fear! Hunger! Fear!*

The hunger pains were staggering, but he focused his attention on Kulin. "Me too," Rigley whispered. "Where do you find your courage?"

"What choice do I have?"

"You could run," Rigley said. "You could save yourself."

"Not at the cost of my pride, demon."

*HUNGER!* it screamed.

"I'm no demon," Rigley muttered, squelching the voice in his head. "I'm a man. A coward." He could not meet Kulin's stare. "Go on. Bury your sister, boy."

Kulin gestured at something over Rigley's shoulder. "Will one of you help me?" he asked.

The wagon driver heard a sharp intake of breath behind him. Startled, he turned.

Lidra leapt at him, dagger in hand, her form lost in the loose lavender folds of her robes. She smashed into Rigley, burying the blade in his sternum.

*Rage!*

He howled, dark veins pulsing in his arms and chest, and with reckless force he drove Lidra's petite frame into the earth. A curtain of sand exploded around them.

Kulin sidestepped the collision and fell backward, watching the battle with wide eyes.

Lidra writhed at Rigley's feet, gasping for air. He slid the dagger from his chest. Black blood clotted in the wound. Tiny shadow threads interwove and sealed it, and Rigley glanced at them uncertainly as they worked.

With a sudden kick, Lidra swept him to the ground. She scrambled atop his swollen body and with a decisive grunt thrust a second blade through his breast.

*Dread. Horror. Hysteria.*

*Pain!*

Her hand still firm on the dagger in his chest, she pulled a third blade from her robes and punctured his gut. Dark blood curdled frantically around the steel, and she twisted both weapons.

Kulin observed the struggle from a distance while crouched beside his sister's corpse. He winced as Lidra angled the blade into Rigley's belly.

"You didn't heed my warning, Rigley," she hissed, pushing farther into his stomach. She released the dagger in his chest and with her free hand produced the sack from a pocket in the purple fabric. The other hand turned the blade in his gut, sending new waves of pain. "I said I'd kill you for touching this again. Remember? You cannot imagine the wealth I shall gain for delivering it."

Holding the sack by its open mouth in front of Rigley's prone figure, she began to chant in quick, whispered tones. The runed cloth smoldered with arcane light. He sensed something lurch inside of himself—heavy, sharp

movement that clambered against his spine. Gasping, wheezing, he felt a flood of emotion.

*Fury! Outrage!*

The demon's angry shrieks rattled through his skull. They swelled and intensified—bitter, furious, spiteful feelings—and coerced the last bit of strength from his ruined muscles.

"You can have it back," Rigley said. "I think it's through with me."

He grabbed Lidra by the wrist and elbow and pulled the knife deeper into his gut. The blade's point scraped at his insides, and the wound swallowed Lidra's fingers.

She dropped the bag and tugged violently against him. A slender black tendril crept out over the knife and down the back of her hand. Another wrapped her wrist and snaked up her forearm.

Lidra released her hold on the hilt, but she could not yank free of the wound. The sludge worked toward her shoulder, slithered around her neck, and pried her lips open. Her eyes shone white with horror, and she collapsed in the sand. She clawed at her neck as the demon wedged past her jaw and down her throat, and she gave a terrified, muffled scream before it disappeared within her.

Rigley ripped the blades from his chest and stomach, grunting loudly and sputtering blood from his mouth. His veins, still broad and black, shrank with each heartbeat, and the bone spikes protruding from his form slid beneath his skin.

He rolled clumsily to his feet, spilled once again to the ground, and clambered for Uroto's sword. He wrapped his hands around the enormous hilt but could not find the strength to lift it.

"Boy!" he called, his voice cracking. "Kulin. Help me."

Kulin eyed him warily from across the camp. Lidra was squirming between them, choking on the monster.

"Damn it, child!" he hollered. "Quickly!"

The boy deliberated a moment longer and then sprinted toward him.

Together they raised the blade. Lidra sat upright, her jaw clenched and her face blue, and fished in her robes for a throwing knife. Rigley and Kulin moved as one, step for step, and speared her through the stomach in a single unified lunge. Rigley threw his weight behind the blow, and Lidra's body crashed against a dune.

The sword had erupted from her back, skewering her to the sand. Blood blossomed around the blade, tarnishing the purple of her robes. Rigley put his arm over the boy's shoulders and stumbled backward as shadowy tendrils shot out from Lidra's form, flailing at the sword, at the surrounding sand. A high-pitched screech tore the desert air. Kulin shook free from Rigley's grasp.

"Stay back, boy."

Kulin nodded, staring intently at the writhing, wailing thing that was dying, impaled in the hot sand. The black tendrils started to sizzle in the sun, sending up thin streams of smoke. A moment later they fell still.

Rigley's legs shook. His wounds had closed, but the cost was great; he bore the bent spine and trembling gait of a man two decades older. His red-brown hair was now wispy strands of cobweb, limp and gray, dangling over his eyes. "We have to go. It's not safe here."

"No," said Kulin. "I have to bury my sister."

Rigley struggled for balance, then steadied himself. His expression changed from worry to resolve. It was a new sensation for Rigley, but he found that he liked it. "Then . . . I . . . I will help you." He panted, surveying the grisly camp. It was strewn with the bones of those who had trusted fate to take them to a new life.

"I will help you bury them all."

## About the Authors

MICKY NEILSON is the Publishing lead at Blizzard Entertainment, where he has worked since 1993. Micky's game-writing credits include *World of Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, *Warcraft III*, and *Lost Vikings 2*. He is a television and movie fanatic, and with his writing partner Sam Didier, he writes screenplays in his spare time. (What spare time? Luckily he was able to create a fold in the space-time continuum!) Micky's first comic series, *World of Warcraft: Ashbringer*, hit #2 on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list for hardcover graphic books. Micky and James Waugh cowrote *World of Warcraft: Curse of the Worgen* in 2011. With the support of his wife, Tiffany, and his daughter, Tatiana, Micky looks forward to continuing his adventures in the worlds of Blizzard and beyond for many years to come.

CAMERON DAYTON is a story developer and writer at Blizzard Entertainment, where he helps create the narratives that drive Sanctuary, Azeroth, and the Koprulu sector. He coauthored *Advent Rising* with best-selling novelist Orson Scott Card and has written for games, film, animation, and television. Someday he hopes to add "politically relevant puppet opera" to his resume. Someday.

MATT BURNS is a staff writer on Blizzard Entertainment's Creative Development team, although he had originally hoped for the highly coveted Sword Engraver position. A graduate of Chapman University's film and television program, Matt enjoys writing screenplays, gaming, drawing, and working toward his lifelong dream of building a real hoverboard (one that *will* work on water). During his time in Creative Development, he's written short fiction for each of Blizzard's game universes: *World of Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, and *Diablo*. In 2011, he played a role in developing the *Diablo: Book of Cain* illustrated guide.

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JAMES WAUGH is a senior story developer and writer at Blizzard Entertainment, where he builds franchise characters and narratives, creates lore, and oversees the story development on filmic and cinematic content. Since 2008, he has been the story editor on all licensed and ancillary fiction for Blizzard's bestselling game universes (*World of Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, and *Diablo*), as well as contributing to the games themselves. After a career in the film and television industry—where James worked as a development executive, screenwriter, and producer—his excitement about the potential of interactive narrative and transmedia drove him to change course and dive headfirst into the virtual worlds of games. Now he gets to tell his fiancée that all that time he spends killing zombies and zerg is for work.

ERIK SABOL has been writing professionally since 2006. His short story “Flag of the Black King” was a finalist in the 2009 Blizzard Global Writing Contest, and his latest piece, “The Hunger,” marks his debut as a writer for Blizzard. Erik is currently studying creative writing at the University of South Florida.

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